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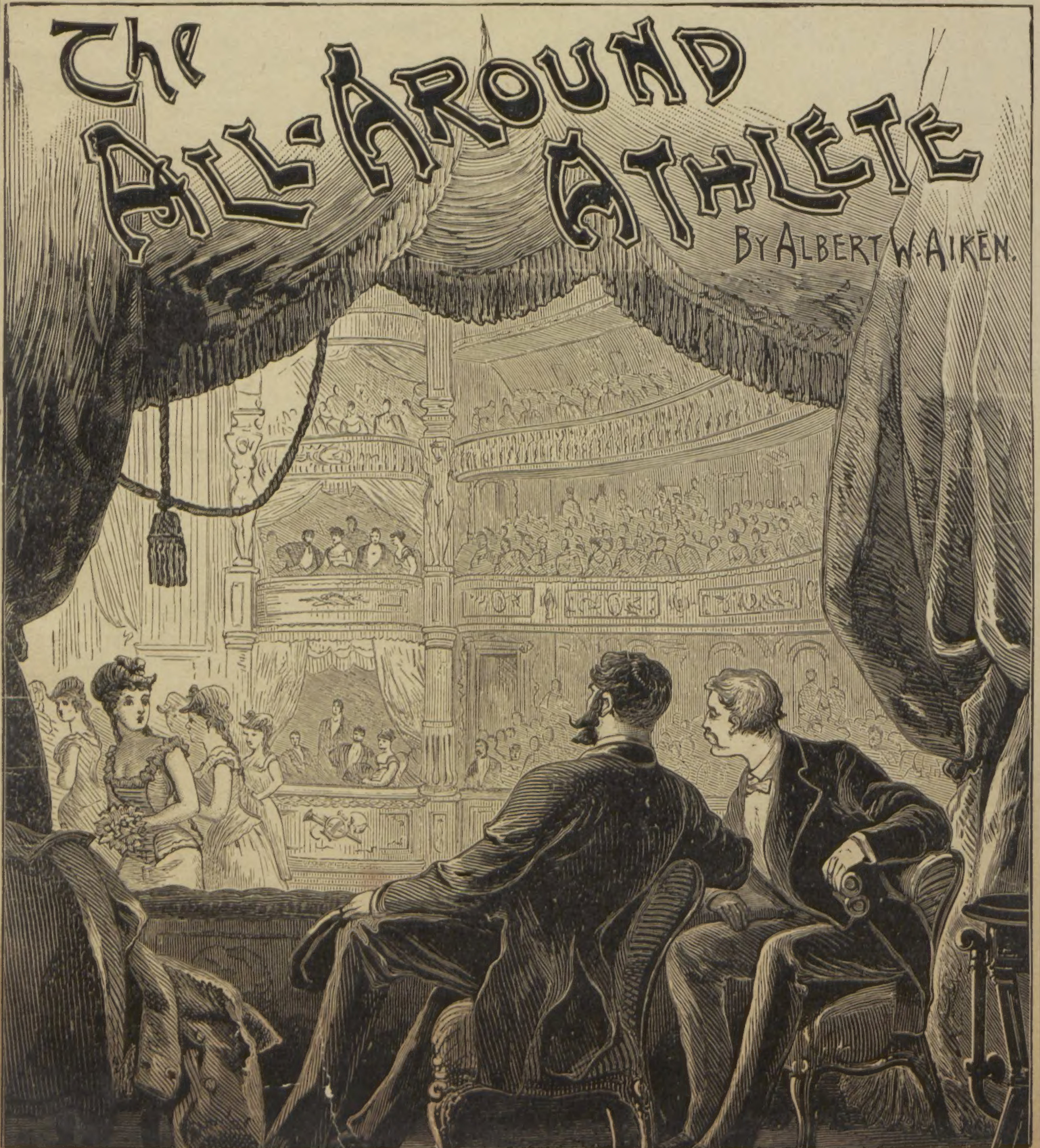
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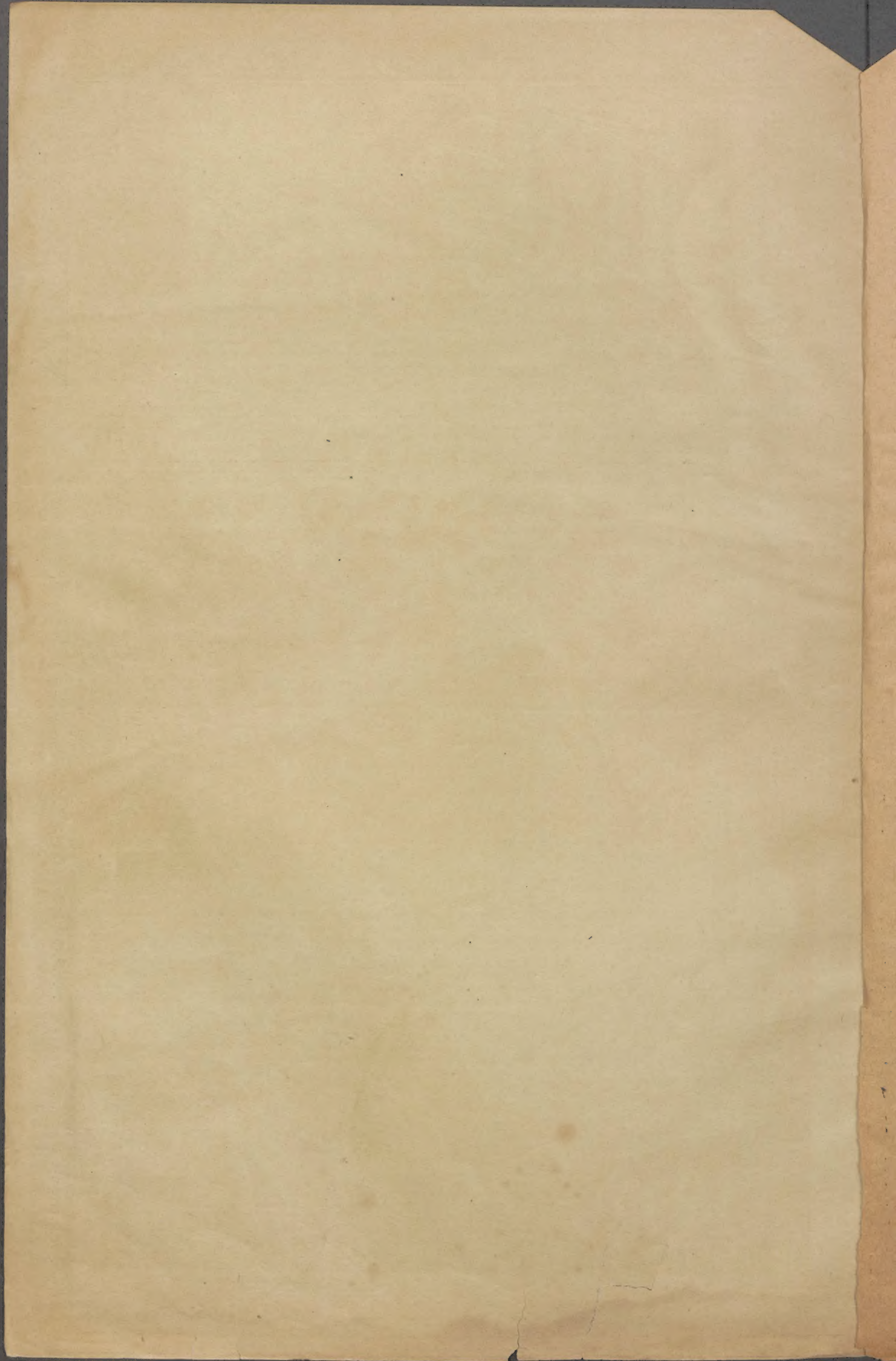
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Vol. LXXVI.



MISS BALLENTINE, PASSING WITHIN A FEW FEET OF THE BOX, SUDDENLY UTTERED A LOW CRY.



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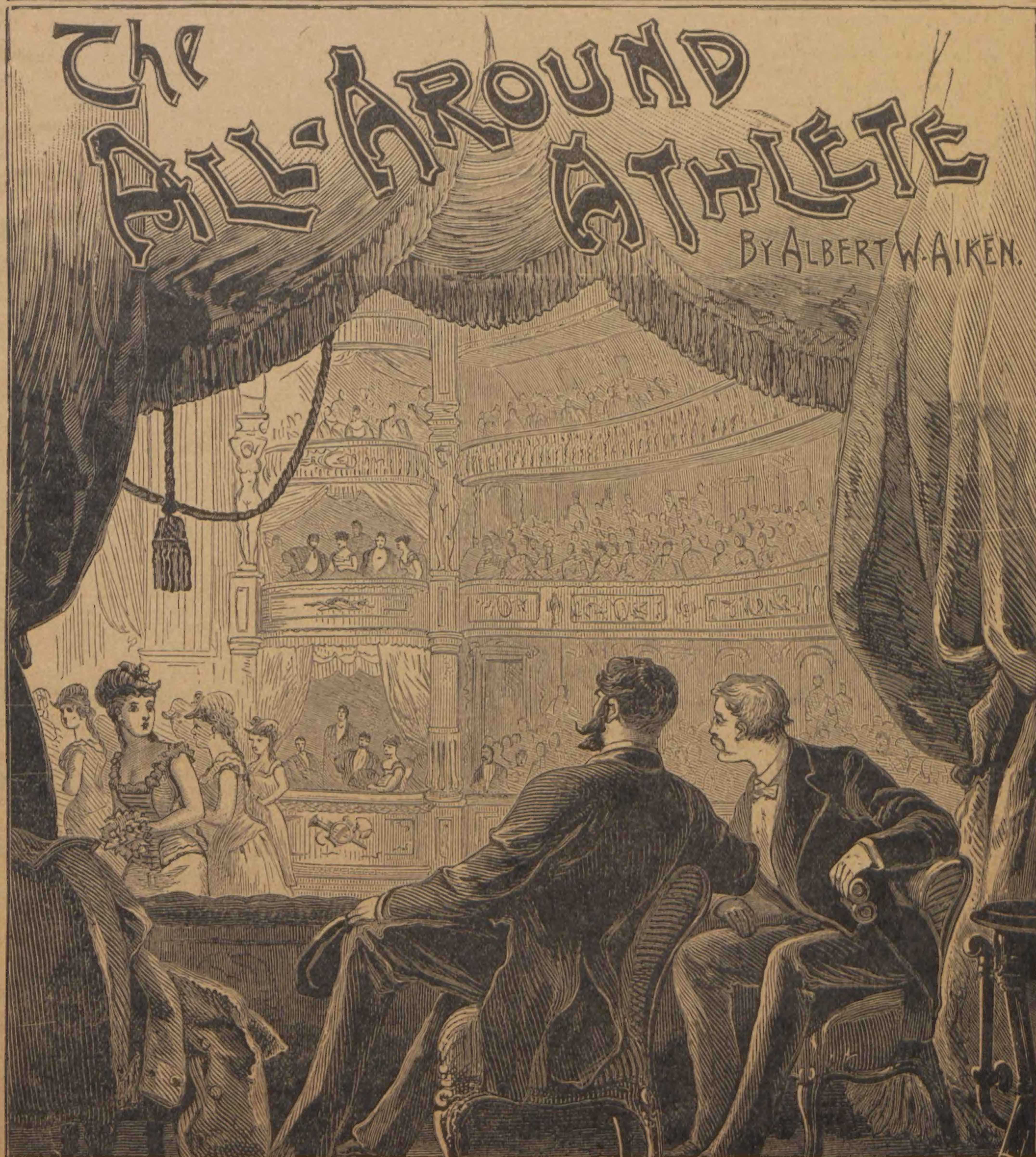
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MISS BALLENTINE, PASSING WITHIN A FEW FEET OF THE BOX, SUDDENLY UTTERED A LOW CRY.

The All-Around Athlete;

OR,

The Stage-Detective's Ten-Strike.

A ROMANCE OF

THE BLACK CROOK QUEEN.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "JOE PHENIX" TALES, "FRESH OF FRISCO" ROMANCES, THE "DICK TALBOT" SERIES, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

TEN o'clock at night, in the month of September, in the city of New York, and the location the theater know as the Academy of Music, one of the most popular of all the play-houses of the metropolis.

It is not with the front of the house, filled with a great audience, that we have to do, but with the world behind the curtain.

It was the interval which preceded the last act of the great spectacular play, the Black Crook.

The scene-shifters and stage mechanics were busy as bees, getting everything in readiness for the final act.

The actors, both men and women, and the army of auxiliaries, ballet, supernumeraries, and "variety people," were clustered in the "wings"—as the side scenes which mask the stage are called—in little groups.

In one of the upper entrances, in the prompt side, stood the actor and actress who played the leading roles—Rudolph and Amina.

The Rudolph was a good-looking, although rather fat-faced man of five-and-twenty, with an unmistakable English air.

Chandos Richmond was his name, and he had only been in New York for a few weeks, having been imported by the management expressly to play the part of Rudolph.

The Amina was a sweet-faced, blonde girl of two-and-twenty, called Florence Ballentine, and was also from England's sea-girt isle.

The pair played the lovers in the piece, and the gossips of the company asserted that the two were indulging in a little real love-making off the stage.

At the moment, though, when we bring them to the notice of the reader, they were not exchanging words of love; on the contrary they were on the verge of a quarrel.

Richmond was a rather overbearing fellow—his associates declaring that he had a severe attack of the "big head."

Being an imported actor he thought himself decidedly superior to his companions, which did not serve to make him a favorite with the rest of the actors; on the contrary it rendered him unpopular with the most of his associates.

During the preceding act Richmond fancied that he had detected Miss Ballentine flirting with a young blood in one of the private boxes who had cast a costly bouquet as a tribute to the girl's beauty or genius.

Now, as we introduce them, the rather arrogant actor was taking the girl to task for it.

"I don't think I ever saw any woman act more disgracefully on the stage!" he exclaimed, hotly; "and I can just tell you that, if I was the stage-manager, it would cost you about ten dollars!"

The girl's face flushed as red as the scarlet ribbons of her beautiful dress.

"I don't know what you mean, and I think it is outrageous that you should talk in this manner to me!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, you are extremely innocent, but I saw just what you were up to!" he sneered. "Do you think I did not notice you flirting with that young fool in the box, who threw you the bouquet?"

The girl's face flushed even a deeper scarlet.

"This is really too ridiculous for anything!" she declared in a voice trembling with rage.

"But it is the truth, and you do not dare to deny it."

"I do deny it! It is utter nonsense!" she retorted. "Considering that I was not twenty feet from him when he threw the

bouquet, and happening to be looking in his direction, it would be foolish for me to say that I did not see him, for I did. But, the accusation of flirting is not true; and if it was I have not given you any authority as yet to dictate to me."

"Possibly you do not intend to ever give me any authority!" he exclaimed with ill-concealed insolence.

"If you are going to go on in this way, I think I would be very foolish to give you any authority."

"You can please yourself in regard to that; it doesn't make any difference to me!" was the Englishman's arrogant retort.

"Very well; I am quite satisfied!" the actress assumed, not at all disinclined, apparently, to be rid of such a lover or suitor.

"You have made a fool of me, of course!" the man declared in his passion, "but I can tell you that I am not the kind of chap to allow anybody to do that with impunity. I can't very well get at this chuckle-headed young swell in the box, but there is a certain other man on this stage that I intend to speak a few plain words to, and that right speedily!"

The actress regarded him with a look of astonishment, and questioning.

"Oh, you may stare, but I have noticed how he has been dangling after you ever since the season commenced; and you have led him on, too. You ain't anything but a giddy flirt, and I was foolish to ever waste a thought on you! But I will bring this Master Black Crook to a speedy account, all the same, though."

"Are you speaking of Mr. Blondell?" the actress asked, in surprise.

"That is the man; and I will make him pay dearly for his flirtation with you."

"Oh, this is all such utter nonsense!" the girl protested, impatiently. "I have not flirted with the man. I have, of course, conversed with him on repeated occasions, but there has never been the slightest flirtation between myself and Mr. Blondell—never!"

"Eh? Did you call me?" said a deep-toned voice, and a man who happened to be passing as the girl spoke, came toward the two.

A peculiar appearance the new-comer presented. It was the actor who played Hertzog, the Black Crook, the character from which the spectacular drama takes its name.

The Black Crook of the play is an ugly, fiendish-looking old man, dressed in a rusty suit of black; he is a necromancer who has dealings with the Spirits of Evil, and is on familiar terms with Satan himself.

When he appears in the sight of the audience the aged crook is bent almost double from the weight of years resting upon him, and so aptly illustrates the title.

But now the noted actor was walking erect in his natural posture—a fine-appearing personage.

The unreasonable Englishman's anger had arrived at that stage when he was quite ready to quarrel with anybody, and about anything.

"Oh, you have been playing the eaves-dropper, eh, Mr. Variety Man?" Richmond sneered.

Blondell was one of those all-around men equally good in a half-a-dozen lines. He was a good actor, an excellent acrobat and pantomimist, and a clever dancer and singer.

It was apparent to the young man that the Englishman desired to quarrel with him and he was not averse to accommodating him, evidently, for he answered:

"Your speech is an offensive one, sir, and if Miss Ballentine will have the kindness to retire I will answer you in the way in which you deserve to be answered."

"Oh, gentlemen, I hope you are not going to quarrel!" the girl cried, deprecatingly, yet turning to depart.

"No danger of that," Blondell assured, with a smile; and Miss Ballentine hurried away.

"Now then, sir, I do not intend to waste many words on you!" the Black Crook announced. "I consider you to be an insolent upstart who needs a lesson in civility, and I shall take great pleasure in giving you one—one that you will not forget, I hope."

The face of the Englishman grew scarlet with rage. He had never before been "called down" so decidedly. He was "on the fight" at once.

"You just wait until I get you outside of the street, and, hang me! if I don't give you the worst thrashing a man ever got!" Richmond blustered, clinching his fists as he spoke.

"Oh, that is a poor way to arrange the matter," the other replied. "We cannot fight in the street, as you know, for there would be a crowd around us at once; then the police would sail in and we would both be lugged off to the station-house."

"Now, as I am not anxious for notoriety of that kind, I can suggest a better thing: After the performance, and we are dressed, we can go down to the trap cellar where there is plenty of room for a sparring match."

"By explaining to the master-carpenter he will see that we are not disturbed, and he, with his assistants, will be glad to see fair play."

"That suits me, but I will hammer the life out of you, you blooming Yankee!" Richmond responded, his face almost contorted in his ugly mood.

The tinkle of the curtain-bell interrupted the conversation.

CHAPTER II.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

THE last act of the wonderful play proceeded as usual to the end. The lovers were united in the realms of bliss, while the Black Crook was consigned to the flames below.

Down came the curtain amid the applause of the vast audience, and then followed the usual hasty rush of the big crowd for the street, while the actors proceeded to their dressing-rooms.

Richmond shared his with the comedian of the company, an actor named William Wilkins, who played the role of Hertzog's servant, Greppo.

Although Billy Wilkins was an exceptionally funny comedian on the stage, and never failed to keep the audience in a roar of laughter, yet in private life he was one of the quietest of men, as so many of our best humorists are known to be.

As a rule, the majority of strangers who met him supposed that he was either a minister or a teacher, for his usual garb was of sober black, and the expression of his fine-featured face was calm to gravity.

All through the last act the Englishman had been hot with rage, and when he and Greppo commenced undressing in their room the irate Briton told his companion all that had occurred, and announced what he intended to do.

Notwithstanding his grave countenance and sober ways the comedian was a great practical joker, and after the Englishman got through telling how he was going to "hammer" the offending Crook, Wilkins proceeded to get in his "fine work."

"By Jinks, Richmond, old fellow! I am afraid you are going to make the mistake of your life!" he exclaimed, with a melancholy shake of the head.

"How so?"

"You never met this Blondell before, did you?" the comedian asked, sympathetically.

"No, never."

"And you don't know anything about him, of course?"

"Nothing, except that he is a blooming, impudent hound of a Yankee, utterly without good manners or good sense."

"Acting isn't his regular business, you know."

"Yes, I was told that he was what you Yankees call an all-around man, whatever that is."

"It means that he can do a little of everything in the show line, same as a Jack-of-all-trades; but his best holt is in the circus line. He is one of the Hey Rube fellers!"

"What the deuce do you mean by that?" the Englishman inquired, in surprise. "Who is 'Hey Rube,' tell me that!"

"Why, in small country towns the tough fellows sometimes attempt to run things in their own way, and when the show people see that they are in for a fight, some one of them sets up the cry of 'Hey Rube!' That is the signal for all the fighting men of the circus to jump on the toughs."

"Ah, yes; I comprehend."

"Well, this Blondell used to be the leader of the gang of fighters, and people say he was one of the best Hey Rube men in the country."

By this time Richmond was half dressed, but he now suspended operations for a moment to look suspiciously at his companion.

"Come now! what is this you are giving me?" he demanded. "Hang me! if I don't believe you are trying to stuff me with a regular cock-and-bull story, for you are such a precious joker that a man never knows how to take you."

"My dear fellow, I am giving it to you as straight as a string!" the comedian persisted; "I really don't think you ought to go up against this man without knowing something about him. Why, he has such a reputation as a fighter that it is reported he was going into the regular prize-ring to tackle one of the champion lightweights if some one of the clubs could be induced to hang up a big purse."

"Oh, bosh! I don't believe all that, you know! It is just a blooming bluff and I can't swallow it!" and the Briton showed his disgust.

By this time the two were dressed and ready for the street.

"Just come along and see me whale this great champion," Richmond urged, confidently.

"All right; I'm a spectator!"

So, instead of proceeding to the street, the pair descended to the open space under the stage where the "traps" are situated. These traps are the mechanism by means of which the actors disappear through the stage, or suddenly rise through it, to the amazement or amusement of the audience.

In some mysterious way it had become known that Rudolph was going to "scrap" with the Black Crook under the stage, after the performance; so some twenty-five or thirty of the theatrical people had gathered in the cellar, eager to witness the fray.

Blondell was on the ground when the Englishman and the comedian arrived.

The place was illuminated by gas-jets, and as there was an open space about thirty feet square, which could be utilized for the affair, a better spot for an encounter of this kind could hardly have been secured.

Blondell greeted his opponent with a polite bow, which Richmond only slightly acknowledged.

The master carpenter, a grizzled-bearded giant of a man, took it upon himself to act as master of ceremonies.

"Now, gents, how are you going to have this affair pulled off?" he inquired. "Marquis of Queensberry rules, I suppose: three-minute rounds, and one-minute rests?"

"That suits me, and if you will hold the watch I will be much obliged," Blondell responded, in perfect good temper.

"I haven't any objection to officiate, if this gentleman is willing," and the master carpenter nodded to the Englishman.

"I had just as lief have you as anybody else," Richmond replied, arrogantly, and betraying his ill mood.

The stage mechanic, thereupon, took out his watch, in a business-like way.

"There is to be no clinching or wrestling, and if you come together you must separate when I call out, 'break!'"

The opponents nodded, and proceeded to remove their coats and vests, tied their handkerchiefs around their waists in lieu of belts, and rolled their sleeves above the elbow.

"Now then, gentlemen, are you ready?" the master carpenter called, authoritatively.

"All ready!" responded the Crook, while Richmond merely nodded, and scowled as he did so.

"Time!" from the master of ceremonies.

The opponents shook hands, and at once threw themselves into position.

Hardly had they put up their hands than Richmond went in to "rush" his opponent—to catch him unawares.

Blondell fell back before the attack, and avoided his opponent only to play him with some fine sparring; then, for a couple of minutes, the blows were fast and furious, although no particular damage was done.

Tiring of this, Richmond made a clinch, determined to floor his opponent.

"Break, break, break!" yelled the old stage-carpenter.

The fighters obeyed, but no sooner were they fairly apart than the American let fly a right-hander on the jaw which sent the Englishman reeling backward. A left-

hander almost immediately followed, which, landing just under the heart, made Richmond wince with pain.

Maddened by these deft blows, the Englishman summoned all his strength and made a desperate dash at his antagonist, but the Crook met him with a terrific right-hander, catching the Briton flush on the jaw, and sending him over on his back.

At this the timekeeper called the end of the round.

A couple of the scene-shifters, and the sedate comedian, hastened to pick Richmond up, and assisted him to a seat on one of the traps.

Billy Wilkins was as astonished as anybody, for, despite what he had said to the Englishman he really knew nothing about the boxing skill of Blondell, so this skill of the Crook greatly surprised him.

Richmond was blowing like a porpoise.

"By Jove! old man, you'll never be able to get your wind in a minute!" the comedian warned, in the Englishman's ear. "An hour would suit you better."

It did not seem to the Briton that a quarter of a minute had vanished when the master carpenter called "time!"

He had made up his mind to play a waiting game, now—to keep away from his dangerous opponent until he could get his second wind; but Hertzog speedily showed him that it takes two men to arrange a thing of that kind. He saw that his man was winded, and so went right at him.

For about a minute it was give and take, and the bystanders got so excited that it was with difficulty they refrained from yelling their delight.

Richmond was too tired to do much damage, and at the end of the second minute he was knocked out by a terrific whack on the point of the jaw.

The Crook had won the fight!

CHAPTER III.

A PROPOSITION.

MAKING one of a group by the Academy of Music's stage-door, but standing aside from the rest, smoking a cigar, was a medium-sized man, in height, but rather heavily built, and from his peculiar cast of features, and their prominence, was evidently of German descent.

He had yellow hair, inclining to a reddish hue, which curled in little, crispy ringlets all over his head; a short, pointed beard of the same hue; high cheek-bones and a pronounced nose.

A good judge of nationalities would have decided that the blood of Israel's race flowed in his veins—a German-Jew, in fact.

The man, evidently, was well-bred and educated, yet his taste was vulgar, for he wore a flashy suit of clothes and a deal of cheap jewelry.

To this person came another from around the corner of the street, who, as he approached, was seen to be a decided contrast to the first-mentioned man, being undersized, poorly-dressed, and apparently an Englishman.

At once this new-comer recognized the other.

"Aha! there is an old acquaintance! I will speak to him, although he may not wish to remember me," he decided.

So, as he approached, he saluted:

"Isn't this Muller Von Silbon!"

"Oh, yes, Silbon of Silbonhausen!" acknowledged the stout man, in an affected, theatrical way, as he took a good look at the new-comer.

"Well, well!" he ejaculated, "if this isn't Lycurgus Luddingford may I never drink a glass of Munich beer again!"

"You remember me, then?" questioned the Englishman, for such his slight accent proved him to be.

"Yes, yes, my dear fellow! I have a splendid memory, and I pride myself on the fact that I never forget an acquaintance. I remember you distinctly, although it is a good ten years since we met."

"But I am deuced glad to see you all the same," and as he spoke he shook the other warmly by the hand.

The face of Luddingford lighted up; he was decidedly gratified by this unexpected reception and welcome.

"I was not certain whether you would remember me or not after this lapse of years,"

the little man remarked; "and then, too, I am not in quite as good feather now as in the old London days."

Silbon surveyed the other with a critical glance.

"Upon my word, my dear fellow, you do look rusty," he confessed. "What is the matter? The world hasn't been using you well, eh?"

"I have been a little down on my luck," Luddingford admitted.

"Well, that is a state of affairs which comes to all men of the world once in a while. I have been there myself, many a time."

"Are you short of funds, my friend? If so, you must let me be your banker for a while. Permit me," and as he spoke he extended six five-dollar bills to the Englishman. "There, that will put you in good feather again, and then, if you need more, don't hesitate to ask for it."

"Thanks, Muller, old fellow! You are a friend indeed!" Luddingford declared as he pocketed the welcome contribution. "There is the old saying, you know, about casting your bread on the waters."

"That is in the scriptural line, and rather out of mine."

"But, my friend, it fits in here!" the Englishman declared. "You have lent me money without any idea that I can be of service to you, but I have a scheme in my head which, I am sure, will prove a big thing for us both—a scheme that involves the transfer of full five million dollars, and during this transfer a goodly portion of it will fall to the men who manage the matter. But, to become the transfer agent—the intermediary—requires a few thousands of dollars; that secured the whole game is in our hands."

"Oh, as to any moderate amount I can promise that, if the affair can be shown to be feasible; and an old friend of yours, too, will be the banker!"

"An old friend of mine?" the Briton repeated, in surprise.

"Oh, yes; no less a person than the famous queen of the ballet, Mademoiselle Helene Marzello, whom you knew as Helene Nevarro."

"Oh! indeed! Then she has changed her name again?" and as Luddingford spoke his gaze fell on one of the Black Crook "posters" which, in the boldest of type, announced that the distinguished *premiere danseuse*, Mademoiselle Helene Marzello, from the principal European theaters, would appear in the grand ballet entitled "The Dance of the Passions."

"And this is the Nevarro! Another husband?"

"Correct! and as he was an Italian count the lady considered that it was only right she should immortalize his name."

"Yes, that would be her style; get out of it all she could."

"Of course. The count, when he dropped into her keeping, had some money—the remnant of a goodly fortune, but, in six-months' time, the divine Helene had consumed it—every franc of it; and then—"

"And then—another drop-scene?" the Briton guessed.

"Just so! A well-conceived quarrel—a separation and—"

"The usual divorce, eh? Of course another guy was in sight?" the Englishman assumed.

"Just so; another guy."

"And who was he?"

"Not *was* he, my friend; he is now in the toils; and this time it is a scion of an old English family—you must have heard of them—the Dunbartons of Clitheroe."

"Why, that is the family concerned in my five-million scheme!" the Englishman exclaimed, amazedly.

"You surprise me! for that is odd, for a certainty—very odd! But, he's the victim, my friend. In a month or so the madame's divorce from the count will be granted; then she will marry Dunbarton to be ready to spend the fifty thousand dollars which is to come to him—the last of his property."

"Well, nothing amazes me where that woman is concerned!" spoke the Briton after a few moments' reflection. "If you had said she was to cast her net for the President of the United States I should not have been surprised."

"But, it is all right, in this instance, I

guess," he added. "We can work it together, I presume. How do you now stand with the lady?"

"Oh, I am high in favor!" Silbon answered, with a laugh, and then proceeded to explain:

"It is now a little over ten years since the siren swallowed up my paternal acres; and my wealth, having been squandered, she took occasion to quarrel with me—the usual trick. We parted, and she got a divorce, with small delay.

"After which she coolly explained that she was coming to America to astonish the Yankees by her dancing talents, and suggested that I should become her manager, as she needed a man to look after her affairs!"

"Cheeky, by heavens! What did you?"

"Why, I accepted the offer. The salary and service were better than being obliged to depend upon cards and billiards for a living."

"Lucky for you, and for me, too, my dear fellow, for you can now use your influence to get the madame to go into this scheme, and it will be a rich thing all around.

"Is it safe, may I ask?"

"Rest assured I will take precious good care not to incur any great risk, even to make big money."

"The correct way to play the game!" the German opined, with an approving nod.

"I have had the idea of this scheme for a year or so, now," the Englishman explained, "but I could not exactly decide just how to arrange the matter. Now, however, the way seems clear, for I have no doubt I can induce the lady to go into the affair if you will pave the way in advance."

"I will be glad to do that!" Silbon acquiesced. "And, my dear Luddingford, to show you that I have faith in what you intimate, I will commence operations this very night, and if you will call at our hotel—the Hotel de Paris, just around the corner—about twelve o'clock to-morrow, I do not doubt that you can renew your acquaintance with the madame, and arrange things to your entire satisfaction."

"Very good, indeed! I will be on hand, and if the divine Marzello is in agreeable mood, we will start on a fishing excursion for this trifle of five millions of dollars."

"Here is my hand on that; so good-night!" And they parted.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DIVINE HELENE.

AFTER the Englishman departed, Von Silbon lit a fresh cigar and gazed after the man.

"I should not be surprised if Luddingford has hit upon a good venture," he mused. "He always was a deuced clever fellow, and really gave evidence of possessing great talent as a lawyer. He is erratic, though, and lacks a balance-wheel. If it was not for that he would have made his mark in the world, long ago.

"One thing is certain: when he explains his plans to the madame, it will not take her long to determine whether there is any cash to be made out of the affair or not, for never, in this world, was there a woman with a keener scent for money than this modern Helene."

The meditation of the German was interrupted at this point by the burst of music from the orchestra which announced the descent of the curtain.

"Hello! There is the end of the play, and I may as well go in," so he passed through the stage door and proceeded to the dressing-room of the *danseuse*.

Her French waiting-maid, a sharp-featured woman of thirty, or thereabouts, who answered to the name of Marie Lescant, came out of the room just as the German approached.

"Ah, Monsieur Von Silbon, the madame is anxious to see you immediately, and has sent me after you, post-haste!" the woman explained.

"At her command!" the German replied, cheerily.

"You will find her dressed and ready to receive you."

"Yes, yes!" responded the German, and, tapping at the dressing-room door, he was bade to enter by a woman's voice, singularly sweet.

He opened it and stood in the presence of

the "divine Helene," as the gushing critics had termed her.

The *danseuse* was a woman of thirty-seven or thirty-eight years, but had taken such perfect care of herself that she did not look to be within ten years of that age.

She was about the medium size, with a beautiful face and almost faultless form.

Her features were regular, the complexion the purest red and white, her hair a most beautiful golden tint, with just a slight reddish hue when a strong light fell upon the waving, rippling tresses.

But, the crowning glory of the lovely face was the eyes, which were very large, extremely lustrous and of a peculiar violet-brown, in color—a pair of the most remarkable and attractive eyes ever seen in a human countenance.

The voice, too, was wonderfully sweet; "liquid velvet," as one of her admirers, a literary light, once remarked in a burst of enthusiasm.

Was it a wonder, then, that this beautiful woman, who, also, was a most captivating dancer, should create a great stage sensation, or that managers should be glad to accede to her terms of three hundred dollars per week for her services?

She was completely dressed for the street when Von Silbon entered, excepting that she did not have on her hat.

"Ah, you have come!" the lady exclaimed, as the German made his appearance.

"I am here, at your service!"

"Close the door behind you, quick!" was commanded imperiously.

"Certainly!"

Von Silbon could see that the madame was much excited and wondered what had occurred.

"Do you know this chuckle-headed Englishman who plays Rudolph?" she inquired.

The dancer, although born in Italy, of an Italian mother and a French father, yet spoke English like a native.

This was due to the fact that her parents were wandering professional people, both of them dancers, and accustomed to making themselves at home no matter where they went.

"Yes, I know him," was the answer.

"And you also know Mr. Blondell, the gentleman who plays the Black Crook?"

"Certainly!"

"The two have quarreled, and they are going to have a fight with their fists in the trap-room as soon as the performance is over!"

"A fight with fists?" asked Von Silbon. "Isn't there some mistake about that?"

"No, no!" vehemently; "there is no mistake, for Marie heard two of the shifters talking about it, and all the working people of the theater are going to see the fight."

"Well, I shouldn't mind taking it in myself, although I do not think it will amount to much, for the Englishman is too big for the other man," Von Silbon stated.

And he wondered why the woman should take any interest in the affair.

"Oh, yes; you must not fail to be present!" the *danseuse* urged; "and the English brute must not hurt the Crook!"

"Here!" and she drew a little pearl-handled revolver from a secret pocket in the bosom of her dress, "take this and if you find that the Englishman is getting the best of Blondell, you must shoot him!"

"Eh?" exclaimed the German in profound amazement. "I don't understand."

"My heavens! Do I not speak plain enough? The Englishman must be killed rather than that Blondell shall be harmed."

"Oh, yes, I understand," Von Silbon now assured, "but, much as I'd like to execute your commands, in this matter I must decline. We are not in the backwoods, nor down in the South Sea Islands, and if I were to kill the Englishman, as you request, the chances are a thousand to one that I would be hung for the murder."

"No, no! I have plenty of money!" the lady insisted. "I could get you off. Money will do everything in New York, and I would see that you were not punished."

"You might be able to get me off, and then again you might not be. The risk is too great!" Von Silbon declared, decisively.

"Bah! What is the matter with you?"

the *danseuse* demanded. "You used to be a man of resolution. Are you losing your courage now?"—the tone full of contempt.

"Oh, no; I am just the same as ever; but when you ask me to put my head into a hangman's noose I think it is about time to call a halt."

"Well, one point is this—the English brute must not harm Blondell, and I lay a strict injunction upon you to see that he does not," she said, incisively.

"Now you are asking a reasonable thing, as neither man is in any great danger of getting badly injured," Von Silbon reassured the siren. "It is only a question of a black eye or battered nose."

"And is not that bad enough?" the *danseuse* demanded, in a passion. "Heavens! it makes me wild to think of that beautiful face being disfigured!"

Von Silbon looked at her in amazement.

"And that brute—that dog of an Englishman!" she continued—"if he does injure Blondell, he shall repent the act in tears of blood!"

The German's amazement increased.

"Sapperment!" he exclaimed, indulging in his favorite expletive. "What is this strange young actor to you? I am so taken by surprise that I cannot forbear to question."

"I have taken a fancy to the man!" the woman replied, with an impatient gesture; "that is all there is to the matter. He has become dear to me, and it is my will that he shall not be harmed."

"Is not this rather sudden, madame?" Von Silbon asked, more and more astonished: "I never heard you even mention the man before."

"Yes, it is sudden," the *danseuse* admitted, "and I was not conscious that I had learned to care so greatly for him until Marie reported to me that the Englishman and Hertzog were to fight. Then I awoke to the sudden consciousness that the man was much to me."

"Ah, yes, I see," and the German nodded; "but of course, madame, you have not stopped to consider that this Blondell is only an ordinary actor, who, in all probability, hasn't a hundred dollars in the world which he can call his own?"

"I have not stopped to reflect upon anything, except that he is a dear, delightful fellow with whom I have fallen over head and ears in love!"

"This is really astonishing!" Von Silbon asseverated. "In all the years I have been permitted your acquaintance, I never knew you to give way to a caprice of this kind."

"Yes, madame, it is amazing—to fall in love with a penniless man—a fellow who cannot lavish wealth upon you—no diamonds, no house, nor horses and carriages, nor any of the little trifles which your admirers usually insist upon your accepting—not one of these things are his to bestow."

"You do not understand!" the woman cried, impatiently, while her beautiful eyes glowed with unwonted fire. "For the first time in my life, I believe, I feel the influence of a pure and unselfish passion. Other men I have made believe that I loved, and married them simply because they were rich, and I wanted their money, and then when the money was expended I no longer had any use for them, and got rid of them as soon as possible."

"But now—" she paused a moment as if to weigh her words, then burst out:

"I don't care whether this man has got a penny or not! I love him, and I intend to marry him, and make him love me!"

"Ah, my dear madame, I am going to take advantage of our old friendship to speak words of warning!" Von Silbon exclaimed.

"Are you not making a mistake in yielding to this caprice—this momentary infatuation, that cannot last long; and after it is over will you not regret it?"

"That is something I have not troubled my head about," the woman replied with an indifferent air; "I am going to let the future take care of itself, and only think of joys the present may bring me."

"But, how about Dunbarton?" Von Silbon suggested, now in an anxious frame of mind. "You know you have promised to marry the man."

"I will throw him overboard—give him

his walking-ticket, as these Yankees say!" the woman avowed, with a light laugh.

"Think of the fifty thousand dollars you are throwing away if you adopt such a course," her agent reminded.

"Pah! The Black Crook will give me fifty thousand kisses to repay for it!" the *danseuse* retorted. "And in my present state of mind I prefer the kisses to the dollars!" and again she laughed.

"Ah, well, I see it is useless to urge you to reason!" the German declared with a gesture of despair.

"Yes, useless," she replied. "For once in my life I am going to have done with calculation and follow the dictates of my heart."

"But you may not be able to win this man," Von Silbon warned.

"Did I ever try for a man that I did not get?" the *danseuse* asked with the air of a conqueror.

"But this is a different kind of a man, and should he happen to love some other woman it may be a hard matter to win him from her."

"What do I care if he is in love with fifty women?" she vaunted. "I have confidence enough in my own charms and powers of attraction, to be certain that I can win him if I set out to make the conquest!" with superb haughtiness.

"As a matter of fact, I believe he has a love affair with a girl now—this red-and-white clumsy English girl who plays Amina, for it is about her that the Black Crook has quarreled with the other man," the agent informed her.

"A fact that does not trouble me in the least. I know that I can win him from her easily enough. As if that doll, with her bread-and-butter school-girl ways, could compete with a woman like myself!"

"Oh, no; there can be no comparison between you two."

"Good! Run away then, and take particular care that no harm comes to my adored one!" the *danseuse* admonished with an imperious gesture.

"I will do my best!" Von Silbon promised, as he took his departure.

CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER COMMAND.

"WELL, well! of all the strange caprices I ever heard, this is the strangest!" the German commented as he took his way to the trap-room. "Never was so astonished in my life, and yet I thought I knew this woman."

"Know her! Oh, no! There are depths to her nature which I have never fathomed, although I have been acquainted with her for so long."

"I believed that she was a slave to money—that she worshiped gold, and was willing to do almost anything to possess it; yet now, in the coolest and most deliberate manner, she turns her back upon fifty thousand dollars!"

"And there is really no more doubt that she could get possession of the money than that she is a living, breathing woman this night."

"It is a most incomprehensible thing, and the man who believes he can comprehend a creature of her nature is a thoroughbred ass, and no mistake."

When Von Silbon arrived at the stairs which led into the lower region he found a big scene-shifter posted at the head of them who was disposed to prevent him from descending.

The master carpenter had taken the precaution to place a sentinel at the entrance, so as to make sure that no one should descend to the trap-room who would be likely to interfere with the "scrap."

The scene-shifter did not know Von Silbon, and so was inclined to regard him with suspicion.

But the German was too old a man of the world not to understand how to overcome an obstacle of this sort.

He explained that he was the business manager of Mademoiselle Marzello, and, understanding that there was to be a little amusement down-stairs, desired to be present, slipping a dollar into the hand of the man as he spoke.

This had the desired effect, and so Von Silbon witnessed the fight.

Not one of the spectators was more astonished than the German adventurer at the result.

As the reader knows, the affair was all over in ten minutes, and so, in less than fifteen minutes from the time he left the dressing-room of the *danseuse* he was back again.

She sprung to her feet with eager impatience.

"Well, well?" she cried.

Von Silbon hesitated, and cast a glance at the maid who was arranging some of her mistress's garments in the closet.

"Oh, that is all right!" the *danseuse* cried, impatiently.

"You need not fear to speak. Marie knows what I think about the matter," she added.

"Your gentleman is all right; but I can't say as much for the Englishman."

And then Von Silbon related the particulars of the contest.

"Ah, well; I did not have much fears for the result," the *danseuse* observed.

"He is a wonder as far as the art of fisticuffs goes," the German assured. "These English bull-dogs are commonly believed to be the masters of the world at that sort of thing, but this particular Briton cut a very poor figure this time."

"Oh, the Black Crook is no common man," the woman declared.

"I felt sure of that from the beginning," she continued.

"He is not injured, then?"

"Not at all!"

"Why can we not have him to supper with us to-night?" the divine Helene cried, impulsively. "Yes; it shall be that way! You must arrange it, Von Silbon."

"I may be able to do it, if he hasn't a prior engagement."

"No matter whether he has an engagement or not; you must bring him!" she persisted.

"Ah, yes; but I cannot perform impossibilities, you know," the German protested. "If he pleads a prior engagement, and can't come, it will not be possible for me to take him by main force, you comprehend."

"Oh, you will be able to arrange the matter in some way!" the *danseuse* urged. "You are too cunning a fellow to be baffled in a little affair of this kind."

"Come! I am anxious for this service, and I will make you a present of fifty dollars if you succeed in getting him to my private parlor, where I will have a supper fit for a Roman emperor!"

"I will do my best!" the German responded. "Luckily, I happened to meet the gentleman this morning in the saloon on the corner, was introduced to him, and in company with a half a dozen others we had a pleasant time together, for an hour or so."

"It was a lucky chance for it will pave the way," the *danseuse* observed. "I will drive to the hotel, so as to have all in readiness, and you must bring him as soon as you can."

"Allons, then!" Von Silbon exclaimed, and took his departure.

"This is really the most incomprehensible caprice!" he muttered, after he got out of the drawing-room. "Never in all my experience with this woman have I seen her so deeply interested. How long will it last?" and Von Silbon shook his head as though in great doubt.

He reflected over the matter for a few minutes, and came to the conclusion that the supper idea could be worked all right.

Blondell, accompanied by a number of the actors, were in the entry, on their way to the stage-door—the actors trying to persuade the Black Crook, much against his wish, to go with them, to "make a night of it."

This was the German's opportunity.

"Aha, gentlemen, is this what you are up to—trying to steal my guest away?" Von Silbon exclaimed. "I sympathize with you in your desire to celebrate our friend's victory, but I cannot be robbed of his company."

"Blondell, old fellow, you have an appointment to supper with me, you know, and I hope you will not deny me the promised pleasure."

The young actor, looking upon this as a ruse to get him out of his embarrassment, promptly answered:

"Yes, gentlemen, you will have to excuse me; I must go with Von Silbon."

"But, I tell you what we can do, boys!" the German considerably suggested; "we will go down to the corner and drink to the success of Mr. Blondell."

On the principle that half a loaf was better than no bread, the actors assented, so all proceeded to the corner and had one "round" in honor of the American actor's victory.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE PARLOR OF THE SIREN.

AFTER the drinks, Von Silbon and Blondell withdrew, leaving the rest to the enjoyment of another "round" in honor of the occasion.

"We had better take a cab in order to carry out the illusion," Von Silbon suggested as they came out of the saloon, and, Blondell assenting, they were soon on their way to the Hotel de Paris.

"I am much obliged to you for getting me out of the scrape," the young man said. "The boys are all such good fellows that I hated to refuse, and yet, if there is anything in this world I hate it is one of the stag rackets where a man is forced to drink about ten times as much as is good for him," he continued.

"Yes, I agree with you about the matter. I have no liking for that sort of thing myself, and so I had a fellow feeling for you when I saw that you were trying to get away."

"The idea of pleading that you had an appointment with me came into my head, and I thought the game could be worked."

"It succeeded like a charm!"

"And now, my dear fellow, you can do me a service in return, if you will," Von Silbon intimated insinuatingly.

"I will if I can."

"There is a friend of mine who is anxious to have you as a guest at a little supper, and I promised to bring you to-night if I could."

"You see, I make a frank confession that in my interference in your behalf I was really actuated by a selfish motive."

And the German chuckled just as though he considered the matter to be a good joke.

"Well, as you have fairly captured me, I suppose I will have to consent," Blondell replied with a laugh.

"I am very glad indeed that you are willing to oblige me, and I will return the favor if it is ever in my power."

"It will be a small party—only myself, my friend, and you, and I feel sure we will have an extremely pleasant time."

The stoppage of the cab at this moment put an end to the conversation.

The gentlemen alighted and entered the hotel.

It was one of those houses chiefly patronized by professional people.

The hotel front was small, the restaurant large, and reputed to be one of the best in the city.

The *danseuse* had a parlor with two bedrooms attached, and when Von Silbon conducted the young actor into the parlor, their eyes were greeted by the sight of as delicious a little supper as any restaurant of the city could furnish.

From a fancy ice-box too, by the side of the table, protruded the necks of half a dozen bottles of wine, no two of them alike.

There was no one in the room when the pair entered, but when Blondell took a glance around, and saw displayed the many little trinkets and ornaments dear to the feminine heart, he immediately came to the conclusion that the owner of the rooms was a woman.

"Oho! your friend is a lady!" he exclaimed.

"Ah, yes, I shall have to admit the soft impeachment," Von Silbon responded with a smile.

"By Jove, old fellow, you have led me into a trap!" the young actor declared.

"I am not much of a ladies' man, and if I had known in advance that I was going to meet a woman you would have found it a difficult matter to get me to come."

"Well, really, do you know, I had an idea that you might be a little backward about coming forward in a case of this kind,

and so I thought it no harm to use a little deception.

"But you are here now, you know, the supper is on the table—and a most inviting one it appears to be too—and it is certainly too late for you to retreat," Von Silbon argued.

"Oh, as long as I am here I will stay, and face the music!" Blondell responded.

At this moment Mademoiselle Marzello made her appearance.

She was dressed in a plain house gown, but it was made so skillfully, and the colors suited her style of beauty so well that she looked even more beautiful than when attired for the stage in the attractive garments of her profession.

She advanced with outstretched hand and greeted the Black Crook with a warmth which evidently was of the heart.

"Oh, Mr. Blondell, I am so glad to see you!" she exclaimed, pressing his hand and gazing with a beaming smile into his face.

The young actor was a trifle embarrassed by the warmth of his reception. The woman was almost a stranger to him, for they had only been members of the same company for a week, and during that time they had only exchanged a few words at rare intervals.

As the *danseuse* had said, the rise of her passion for the young man had been sudden indeed.

True, she had been attracted by him from the beginning, but had not sought to get on familiar terms.

"I feel honored, mademoiselle," Blondell responded with a polite bow.

"I heard of your triumph to-night over that brute of an Englishman, and I made up my mind to celebrate it with a little supper," the siren explained with a bewitching smile.

"But come! let us to the table, for I am almost starved," she continued.

The three sat down to the repast.

"We must all wait upon ourselves," the hostess assumed with a laugh. "I hate waiters on an occasion of this sort, for they are in the way, to my thinking."

"Decidedly in the way!" the German added. "In a little affair of this kind the presence of the waiter is a decided bar to conversation."

"Oh, it is ever so much more jolly to wait upon ourselves, and as the hostess, I will see that my guests do not suffer."

"Well, judging from the display of wine in the cooler, we will not be allowed to die of thirst," Von Silbon remarked; "but, my dear madame, how comes it that you ordered so many different kinds of wine? It seems to me as if no two bottles are alike."

"I gave orders to have them all different. I know that you gentlemen are sometimes very particular in regard to the wines you drink, and as I was not acquainted with your tastes, I ordered a variety, so as to be sure of pleasing you."

"Wonderful forethought!" Von Silbon exclaimed. "Ah, madame, you have the head of a statesman, and it is evident that you have the talent to manage men."

"You are a sad flatterer, Von Silbon," the *danseuse* declared, shaking her finger archly at the German.

"But now let us take the edge off of our appetite, as they used to say in England, and then we can converse."

"Which is your favorite wine, Mr. Blondell?" she asked.

"I really don't know," the Black Crook replied. "I am not much of a wine-drinker, and all kinds are about alike to me."

"In that case, we will have to depend upon your judgment, Von Silbon," the madame remarked.

"I know that you have excellent taste in a matter of this kind," she continued.

"Certainly; I have had a good deal of experience in that line," the German observed.

Then he selected a bottle of wine from the ice-box, and the three proceeded to do justice to the supper.

"How did it happen that you and the Englishman had a misunderstanding?" the *danseuse* asked after a little while.

"You see I am curious about the matter. I know that it isn't any of my business, but then a woman never stops to think of anything of that kind, for it is the nature of the sex to be inquisitive."

"As a woman has so many attractive vir-

tues it is only natural that she should have some little failings," Blondell observed with a gallant bow.

"That is very prettily said, indeed!" the *danseuse* declared.

"Now, you must take a glass of wine with me on the strength of that observation."

"Von Silbon here is a great flatterer, but I don't believe he could say anything prettier than that."

"Oh, you wrong me!" the German declared. "I always make a point of sticking to the exact truth when conversing with a lady, and then when a lady like yourself is concerned, it is almost impossible to say anything too complimentary," and Von Silbon bowed low.

"Ah, you gentlemen are all alike!" the *danseuse* declared with a laugh.

"Compliments flow with the greatest ease from your lips, and a poor woman must keep her wits about her or she is certain to be dazzled."

"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed the two gentlemen in chorus.

"But, with your compliments you have diverted me from the subject, about which I am very curious," the madame remarked.

"I suppose I am indiscreet in attempting to pry into the matter, but I have a raging curiosity which I am anxious to satisfy."

"Is it true, Mr. Blondell, that there is a lady in the case?"

And as she put the question she fixed her bright and beautiful eyes full on the face of the Black Crook, while an attractive smile wreathed her lips.

"Aha! that is a delicate subject, eh? Blondell?" exclaimed the German, in a jesting way.

"You know, of course, how gossip circulates around a theater, and as I heard whispers that the quarrel arose on account of a woman my curiosity was excited."

"The matter is not worth talking about," Blondell declared.

"Mr. Richmond is inclined to be hot-headed and quarrelsome," he continued.

"Oh, yes, I know that," the madame replied. "And although I have not much of an acquaintance with the gentleman, yet I have seen enough of him to understand that he is very overbearing and disagreeable."

"That is the truth, I think," Von Silbon remarked.

"At any rate that is the impression which I formed regarding him," the German added.

"The gossips did not hesitate to give the name of the lady," the *danseuse* remarked.

"You know how freely any scandal circulates in a theater."

"And the talkers did not hesitate to say right out that you and Mr. Richmond quarreled on account of Miss Ballentine."

"I suppose that because Mr. Richmond makes love to the lady upon the stage he has come to the conclusion that no man but himself has the right to cast admiring glances upon her," the lady added.

Von Silbon laughed outright.

"What an absurd idea!" he declared.

"But it is just like these Englishmen; they are a terrible bull-headed set!"

"Well, people will talk just so much," the Black Crook observed, a trifle embarrassed, for he did not relish being subjected to a cross examination, yet under the circumstances he did not see how he could avoid it.

"And very often it does not seem to matter to the gossips whether there is a grain of truth about the matter or not," Blondell observed in conclusion.

"Ah, Mr. Blondell, but you cannot say that there isn't any truth about this report!" the *danseuse* declared with an arch look.

"Well, I suppose I will have to admit that that is a fact," the Black Crook replied with a smile.

"But, really, you know, the matter isn't worth talking about, for it does not amount to anything."

"Mr. Blondell, you are too mean for any thing not to be willing to satisfy my curiosity!" the madame declared.

And then she shook her head and pretended to be extremely disconsolate.

"Yes, Blondell, you are a very hard-hearted fellow!" the German remarked with mock solemnity.

"Surely you don't want to see me die with curiosity?" the *danseuse* exclaimed, pretending to be deeply affected.

"Speak! and avert the calamity!" Von Silbon urged.

"Ah, I see that you are bound to extort a confession from me, so I suppose I may as well make a virtue of necessity and confess as soon as possible!" Blondell acquiesced, falling in with the humor of the others.

"And you will find me a most liberal father confessor, too," the lady remarked, with one of her most bewitching smiles.

"If you are truly penitent, and make a frank and free confession, I will be glad to grant you complete absolution."

"As I said before the affair does not amount to anything. I believe there is a little love affair between Miss Ballentine and Mr. Richmond; the Englishman, too, is disposed to be rather jealous of the lady."

"To-night the two were conversing in one of the upper entrances, and, I presume, were having a rather heated discussion when I happened to come that way."

"I heard my name mentioned, and got the impression that I was called, so went to them, whereupon the Englishman immediately took me to task for carrying on a flirtation with the lady."

"And this was not the truth, of course!" the *danseuse* assumed, with a merry laugh, and a glance which plainly implied that she thought the accusation was a just one.

"You are correct; it was not the truth," Blondell replied, with a serious air.

"I had chatted with her a half a dozen times possibly," he continued, "and as she is a ladylike and intelligent girl I enjoyed her conversation, but it was absurd to say that I was flirting with her or attempting to do anything of the kind."

"Ah, yes; but that would come in time!" the madame intimated, with a demure smile.

"But even if it had been the truth, I would not have admitted Richmond's right to interfere in the matter. The lady was not his wife, and not even engaged to him, as far as any one knows, so it was none of his business."

"But, really, the lady had but little to do with the matter. The Englishman was angry, and in just the disposition to quarrel with some one."

"He couldn't very well fight with a woman, and, as I happened along just in the nick of time, he immediately proceeded to attack me."

"I wouldn't submit to be talked to by him; I had no hesitation in telling him so, either, and that is all there is to the matter."

"Then you are not really in love with Miss Ballentine?" the madame asked.

"Oh, no. I am heart whole at present," Blondell replied with a smile.

"She is a very charming girl though," the *danseuse* remarked, watching the face of the Black Crook closely as she spoke, although she was careful not to allow him to perceive that she was doing so.

"Oh, yes, she is a pretty girl, and very good company," the Black Crook remarked, with an indifferent air.

"Probably your friendship with her will soon ripen into love?" the *danseuse* suggested with another one of her entrancing smiles.

"Oh, no; I don't think there is much danger of that. I am not a marrying man, being too fond of my own liberty to give it up and tie myself to a wife."

Then the conversation turned, and the three talked upon various subjects, but as none of them are of interest to our readers, we will not take up time by detailing the words of the trio.

Full justice was done to the viands and the wine, and after an hour or so the gentlemen rose to depart.

"You must not forget your way to my hotel," the lady remarked.

"I shall always be at home to you, and always be delighted to receive a visit."

"I am honored," Blondell replied with a polite bow.

"And you will not fail to come?" the *danseuse* asked, with an appealing look on her beautiful face.

"If you only knew how horribly lonesome I am alone here all day long, you would take pity on me and come to cheer my dull hours."

"I shall be pleased to call," the Black Crook responded.

"And soon, too?" she queried, in her most seductive way.

"Yes, soon."

The two gentlemen then departed, but in a moment the lady called upon Von Silbon to return.

"A moment, please," she said. "I have a commission for you!" and when the German was at the door, she whispered hurriedly to him.

"Sound the man as soon as you can in regard to his sentiments toward me! An apprehension has seized upon me that I cannot win him. You can speak plainly as to how I feel about him, and bring matters to a climax."

"I will not fail to do so," Von Silbon assured.

CHAPTER VII.

GETTING AT THE TRUTH.

VON SILBON did not relish the task which had been given him. "Confound the woman!" he muttered under his breath, as he proceeded along the corridor to join Blondell, who was waiting for him at the head of the stairs.

"I wonder what in the world possessed her to take this notion into her head? This is so utterly foreign to her character that I am really astounded."

"In all her love affairs before I never knew her to take much of any interest in the man. Her chief concern was in regard to the amount of cash which the gentleman possessed, and the chances of her being able to get hold of it."

"And it is really amazing to think that at this late stage of the game she should take a notion to fall in love with a man who hasn't got any money."

"It is really a wonderful thing, and I should be inclined to be lost in amazement if it was not for the fact that long ago I became possessed of the knowledge that women are most incomprehensible creatures, and apt to do the most outrageous things without any reasons."

Blondell, perceiving that the German was coming, began to descend the stairs and Von Silbon overtook him at the bottom.

The two proceeded to the street in company.

"Where are you staying?" Von Silbon asked.

"In Twelfth street, near Fourth avenue."

"I will walk down with you then. I am going down town, anyway, as I have an appointment at three o'clock with one of the newspaper men."

"He told me that by that time he would be through with his work, and would wait in the office for me."

"You see, my dear fellow," the German continued, as he passed his hand in a familiar manner through the arm of the other, "I am a regular night-bird."

"I sleep by day, and prowl the earth by night like an unquiet spirit," and then Von Silbon indulged in a hearty laugh.

"Yes, I see," Blondell responded in his quiet way.

Now though the young actor was retiring in his manner, and not at all inclined to push himself forward prominently, yet during his career he had seen a great deal of life, not only in the New World but in the Old, for he had traveled all through Europe with a circus.

It was not the first time, therefore, that he had encountered men of the stamp of Von Silbon, and after meeting the German it had not taken him long to come to a pretty correct opinion in regard to what kind of a fellow the German was.

And on this occasion, when Von Silbon announced his intention of going with him to his boarding-house, he judged immediately to the conclusion that the man had some purpose in view.

He was careful though not so that the other could have any surveillance that he was on his guard.

The pair turned into Fourth Avenue and proceeded down that thoroughfare.

The street was almost deserted, so they conversed without danger of their conversation being overheard.

Von Silbon was a man who believed in coming to the point as speedily as possible, so, after a few remarks in regard to the beauty of the night, the success that the spectacular play was meeting with and the prospect for a long "run," the German said:

"By the way, old fellow, what do you think of the divine Helene? That is the appellation by which she was generally known in Europe, and all the great cities of Great Britain and the Continent have paid unstinted tribute to her beauty and talent."

"She is a very beautiful woman and an excellent performer," Blondell answered immediately.

"I do not wonder at her success, for she deserves to succeed."

"She is possessed of a very amiable disposition, too, and it is no wonder that she makes friends wherever she goes."

"Yes, she seems to be of an agreeable nature," the Black Crook admitted.

"I don't suppose there is a performer in the world who has been more run after by men and women than the madame, for she is as popular with her own sex as with the lords of creation."

"I am not surprised by it, for she is certainly very attractive."

"Now, old fellow, I am going to tell you something in strict confidence, and I rely upon you not to give me away."

"Oh, no; of course not!"

"The madame is a very peculiar woman. I have known her now for over ten years, and I think I am as thoroughly acquainted with her as anybody in the world; yet for all that, she decidedly astonishes me once in a while."

"The creatures of genius are privileged to be eccentric, you know."

"Very true! No doubt about that," Von Silbon assented.

"She certainly does take odd notions, and it is marvelous the quickness with which she jumps to a conclusion."

"Now I hazard the conjecture that you have not conversed a dozen times with the lady."

"That is true; we have done little more than pass the time of day."

"And yet she has taken a wonderful fancy to you."

"Is it possible?"

"Oh, yes; I know her so well, you understand, that I can see with half an eye how the cat jumps."

And the German placed his finger on one side of his nose, then nodded in a mysterious manner.

"Undoubtedly!"

"Now, then, I am going to give you a tip—a straight steer, as the sport says," Von Silbon observed, in his smoothest and oiliest way.

"You don't mind my speaking plainly?" he questioned.

"Not at all—fire away!"

"Well, then, from the way the divine Helene is acting, I am satisfied that she has taken a most prodigious fancy to you."

"Do you think so?" Blondell asked, in such a non-committal way that the German was puzzled to guess how he was affected by the disclosure.

"Oh, yes; there is no doubt about the matter!" Von Silbon declared.

"I am certain of it, my dear fellow. I know the lady so well that it is an easy matter for me to see that she has become inspired with a grand passion for you."

"It is strange, considering the shortness of our acquaintance."

"Ah, my dear fellow, women are strange creatures, and I really consider this beautiful siren to be one of the most incomprehensible of her sex, and I flatter myself that I have had about as much experience with women as the majority of the men of this world."

"You certainly ought to be well-informed."

"Oh, I am, my dear fellow, there is no doubt about that, and I tell you that I am satisfied that the madame has conceived a grand passion for you."

"And, you must remember, my dear boy, it is no empty compliment either, for I have known men of the highest rank, nobles, counts, dukes, princes, ay, even princes of the blood royal, to become fascinated by her beauty and accomplishments, and yet be denied her smiles."

"I am fortunate, but, unluckily, I don't believe I will be able to avail myself of this piece of luck," Blondell remarked in a matter-of-fact way.

"How is that?" asked the German, rather surprised by the indifference so clearly manifested by the young actor.

"Well, it is just this way: I am one of the kind of men who do not care to marry," Blondell remarked.

"I would not tie myself to the best woman in the world."

"It does not matter to me how beautiful she is, nor how wealthy."

"If she was a queen with a kingdom at her command, it would not make any difference, for it would not be any temptation to me."

"Ah, yes, I see," Von Silbon observed in a reflective way.

His mind was busy in thoughts as to how the divine Helene would receive this news.

It would be decidedly unwelcome, he was sure.

"The chances are great that she will be inclined to blame me," he reflected.

"She will be pretty sure to jump to the conclusion that I have mismanaged the matter, but it is not the truth, for I defy any one to handle the affair in better style."

"Perhaps it would be doing a service both to the lady and myself if you were to take occasion to hint to her that I am not a marrying man," Blondell suggested in his honest way.

"Possibly, that would be a good idea," the German acquiesced.

"Oh, I will tell you what I might do," he then exclaimed as if a sudden thought had just come to him. "I could say, in a casual way, that you had admitted to me that you were in love with some lady—say this Miss Ballentine, for instance."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't say that, for it isn't the truth, you know," Blondell replied, immediately.

"I am not in love with any woman, nor do I think I am likely to be."

By this time the pair had arrived at the corner of Twelfth street, and they shook hands and parted.

The German boarded a down-town car, but after riding a few blocks changed to one bound up-town.

CHAPTER VIII.

A QUEER CUSTOMER.

As Blondell turned into the side-street his attention was attracted to a well-dressed man, evidently under the influence of liquor, who was being escorted down the street by two roughly-attired fellows.

A short way up the block was a dark place, and, as soon as the Black Crook perceived the two men, he came to the conclusion that they were toughs who intended to rob their companion as soon as they got him in a suitable place.

The actor, courageous fellow that he was, quickly determined that he would upset their little game, so hurried silently up the street.

Blondell had guessed correctly; the two fellows were a pair of dyed-in-the-wool crooks—one a tall, slender fellow, with a thin face, which always wore a starved expression, was known as Spike McGilligan.

The other, a short, thick-set man, with coarse features, which greatly resembled a bulldog in their appearance, was called Gimlet Herman, on account of having once, in a street fight, stabbed his adversary with a large gimlet, narrowly escaping being sent to the State Prison for the rest of his days.

These two were so intent upon robbing their victim, as not to take the trouble to look around them when they came to the dark place where they designed to do the deed.

Suddenly they tripped their victim up, and down he went, all in a heap, his head getting a whack on the sidewalk which rendered him insensible.

Then they proceeded to plunder the man; but Spike McGilligan, happening to turn his head, caught sight of the young actor, who now was advancing rapidly.

"Look out! Here comes a bloke!" he warned. "Do him up!" ejaculated Gimlet, not disposed to give up his prey.

The two sprang to their feet and faced

the stranger, in a menacing manner, but un-intimidated Blondell cried:

"Get out, you scoundrels, or I'll hand you over to the police!" and he confronted the ruffians belligerently.

"Ah, wot is the matter with you, young feller?" Spike McGilligan demanded, defiantly. "You just go chase yerself 'round de block!"

"Yes, git a move on ye, and git it on quick too!" Herman added, "for if you don't, we'll do you up in no time!"

"You are a pair of dirty scoundrels!" the young actor retorted, "and if you think you can whip me try it on as soon as possible."

The two ruffians gave vent to a howl of derision.

"Well, if this 'ere don't beat all!" Spike McGilligan declared. "Why, young bloke, wot do you take us to be? a couple of kids?"

"Oh, no, we are a pair of stiffs, both on us!" Gimlet chimed in. "All this 'ere gent has to do is to blow on us, and we will both quit like a couple of steers, I don't think!"

"If you ain't anxious to be punched full of holes you will get a move on you!" and Spike McGilligan advanced in a threatening manner.

Blondell saw that he was in for a tussle with the two crooks, so proceeded to "business" at once.

With wonderful quickness he "led" for the head of Spike McGilligan with his right hand. It was the usual "right hand swing" that ninety-nine men out of a hundred try to land, when they get into a fight. Spike, therefore, expected the blow, and was prepared to guard against it.

But, this particular blow happened to be only a feint, for Blondell's left fist followed his right so quickly, that the crook failed to ward it off, and the result was a crack on the jaw which sent McGilligan over on his back, in short order.

With a cry of rage Gimlet Herman rushed to the attack, eager to revenge the downfall of his pal.

There was a "cross-counter," and the second crook got the straight left between the eyes, the blow flooring him as if he had been shot.

Both of the ruffians were cowards at heart, and this "warm reception" took all the fight out of them, and also fearing the appearance of a "cop," scrambled to their feet and made off as fast as possible, without bestowing another look on the Black Crook.

At this moment a policeman made his appearance on the corner, and, attracted by the sound of the ruffians moving away, he hastened to the spot.

The officer happened to be an unusually intelligent man, and it only required a few words of explanation from Blondell for him to understand the particulars of the affair.

By this time the fallen man sat up and looked around in a dazed way for a moment.

"He is all right, I think," the metropolitan said. "It was only a little crack on the head which stunned him for a moment, and as the scamps didn't get away with any of his valuables, it isn't of any use for me to give chase to them."

"That is true, for you could hardly hope to catch them after they had got such a start," returned the actor.

"What the deuce is the matter with my head?" exclaimed the stranger, in a bewildered way.

"You have been drinking too much liquor," said the policeman, assisting the man to rise, "and if it hadn't been for this gentleman, you would have been robbed of all your valuables by a pair of rascals."

"My dear sir, allow me to extend to you a thousand thanks!"

And with a deal of ceremony he shook Blondell's hand.

In person the stranger was a short, rather stout elderly man, with a round, fat face, which was adorned with yellow side-whiskers, trimmed in the English mutton-chop style.

"I am much obliged to you, too, officer, for your services."

"As you justly observed, I did drink too much liquor; got in with some jolly fellows, you know, and we passed the flowing bowl altogether too freely."

"Then, after we separated, and I started

for my hotel, I have a vague remembrance of two men kindly offering to guide my wandering footsteps. Their assistance was necessary, you understand, for I will be hanged if I could guide them myself."

"I had sense enough to tell them that I lived at the Morton House on Union Square, and that is about the last thing I remember, except that there was some sort of an explosion in my neighborhood which upset things generally, and that is all I know until you gentlemen assisted me to rise."

"The fellers chucked you to the pavement, and you got a clip on the head," the officer remarked. "You are all right, though, and the thing seems to have sobered you up."

"It certainly has, for my head is working quite clearly now, although my legs are weak," the gentleman said with a comical kind of smile.

"You are only a few blocks from your hotel, and I will lend you assistance if you care to have me," Blondell remarked.

"My dear sir, I jump at the offer—that is, I mean figuratively speaking, for I am not in a condition now to take much active exercise," the old gentleman declared with another one of his comical smiles.

Then the two bid the officer good-night, and went on their way.

"I am very much obliged indeed to you, and if it ever comes in my power to return the favor I will be glad to do so. How may I call your name?"

"Arnold Blondell."

"Arnold Blondell? Not the Arnold Blondell who traveled with Ashley's Imperial circus?" asked the old gentleman, surveying the young man with great interest.

"Yes, sir; the same."

"Well, well! this is astonishing, and only shows how small this civilized world is after all," the old fellow declared.

"Why, Mr. Blondell, I saw you in Brussels, and your 'leap for life' was as good as anything in that line that I ever witnessed."

"Do you know it struck me that your face was familiar, and ever since we met I have been trying to recall where I saw it."

"But it was at Brussels. It all comes back to me very clearly now. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Roach, John Roach, but usually termed Johnny Roach. I am the manager of the Royal Australian Troupe of Untamed Bushmen now exhibiting at Huber's Museum. Come over and see the show; ask for me, and I will be glad to do the honors."

"Thanks; I will not fail to do so."

"The blacks are well worth seeing, I assure you. They are the genuine article, too, and no mistake: some of their acts are great."

"Yes; I have heard their performance highly praised."

By this time the two had arrived at the Morton House, and after Blondell saw the old gentleman safely inside he departed.

Little did the Black Crook dream of the important consequences which were to come in the future from this chance meeting with the veteran showman.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SECOND ACT.

THE *danseuse* was a late riser, seldom getting up in the morning until ten or eleven o'clock, a custom common to many of the footlight favorites, and Von Silbon, aware of this fact, did not hurry to rise in the morning.

In fact, he was about as lazy in regard to getting up as the lady.

At half past ten he called upon the madame.

She had just arisen, and was taking her coffee.

"Help yourself to a chair," the lady said.

"Will you have a cup of coffee?"

"Yes, thanks!" and Von Silbon seated himself, while Marie filled a cup of coffee for him.

"Did you execute the commission I gave you last night?" the lady asked, unable to restrain her impatience.

"Oh, yes; I am always prompt in regard to a matter of this kind; but I regret to say, I haven't any good news for you."

"Is it possible? What is the trouble?"

and, as she put the question, dark grew her brows.

"Well, really nothing in particular excepting that the gentleman says he is not a lady's man—that the attractions of the fair sex have no charms for him."

"I do not believe it!" and the *danseuse* sprung to her feet in a passion. "He is not made of stone, but of warm flesh and blood! Such a man is no monk to cast aside a beautiful woman's love!"

"You may think I did not manage the matter rightly, but I assure you I used the utmost care!" the German protested.

"Oh, no; you are wrong in that," the lady replied. "I do not blame you, for I feel satisfied you did the best you could; but, did this man tell you he was indifferent to women's charms?"

"Yes; he declared that, while he was sensible a certain person was a prize well worth the winning, yet he was not a marrying man."

"I do not believe that! It is not the truth! There is—there must be—another woman in the way!" and the *danseuse* spoke vehemently.

"That was my idea, so I tried to catch him in a trap by mentioning Miss Ballentine, but I did not succeed."

"She is the woman, though!" the *danseuse* averred, her eyes glaring with angry fires; "I am sure of it, and if I can get an opportunity I will make her pay dearly for the prize which she has secured."

For a few moments the enraged siren paced up and down the apartment, foaming like an angry tigress.

At the beginning of the conversation the maid had discreetly withdrawn into the adjoining room, and closed the door, so the pair could converse freely.

Von Silbon waited until the *danseuse's* temper had spent itself a little and then remarked:

"In the future, I will take care to keep my eyes upon the pair, and you can rest assured, if there is a love affair between them it will not take me long to find it out."

"And if there is one, you can depend upon it that I will make the girl regret the day when she crossed my path!" and the irate siren flung herself into a chair.

There was a pause, and her manager remarked:

"Oh, by the way, I met an old acquaintance of yours yesterday—that English lawyer, Lycurgus Luddingford."

"He is a very clever fellow, and if he would let liquor alone no doubt would do extremely well."

"I think he is keeping tolerably straight now. I had a long talk with him, and he revealed a scheme which he thinks will bring in a good deal of money, but he needs some cash to work on."

"Why didn't you bring him to me?" the lady inquired. "I have faith in the man's sagacity, and if he will explain his scheme to me, I may think well enough to advance what money he requires."

"He declares that a million of pounds in it. The Dur Brumfamily is concerned."

"Aha! That interested the *danseuse* admitted. "You must hurry him as soon as possible!"

"He will call this jobs.—may arrive at any moment. As soon as I have a readiness to receive him."

Which the German did, and in a short time returned, conducting the Englishman, who looked quite a gentleman in a new suit.

The *danseuse* shook hands with her visitor, greeting him warmly.

"I am glad to see you," she declared. "Von Silbon said that you have a great scheme on hand."

"Yes, on as is managed rightly," the money, if it, but, just at present I am lawyer as col then, too, I am a little un out of fu, to obest way to conduct the matter, ht of ing to tell me the partier

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vice will ay, I have an appoint nent,

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the German observed, consulting his watch. "If you don't need me I will go and keep it."

"Go along! we can get on without you," the *dansouse* replied, once more, apparently, in good humor.

Von Silbon took his departure.

"I am glad that he withdrew," the lawyer remarked, "for in affairs of this kind it is best to restrict a knowledge of the matter to as few people as possible."

"You are right," the woman admitted; "the fewer people in a scheme the less danger of the secret being betrayed."

"Correct!" Luddingford asserted. "By the way, Von Silbon tells me that you are thinking of marrying young Talbot Dunbarton."

"Yes, and I probably shall do so," the woman replied, speaking in an indifferent way, as though the marriage was one of slight importance. "The man is fairly crazy after me—that is, if a man who never had any brains can be said to go crazy."

"I know the party, and am sure he hasn't any sense to spare."

"It is a certain fifty thousand dollars which he will inherit in a year or so which is the attraction for me," the *dansouse* boldly confessed. "If I could get the money without the man, I wouldn't take him. You see, to an old friend like yourself I do not attempt to conceal my purpose. In fact, it might be useless to attempt to do so, for I am aware that you know just what kind of a daughter of Eve I am, so I will not try to wear a mask, now."

"It would not be of much use, I guess," and Luddingford smiled complacently.

"Now for the particulars: Talbot Dunbarton's father, who was named Talbot also, had a younger brother, a wild fellow in his young days, who got into all sorts of scrapes and bad ways, until, finally, he committed forgery and was compelled to fly from England."

"He came to this country under an assumed name, and, going West, became a miner in the Rocky Mountains region."

"His name was Reginald, and in the Far West he was known as Reginald D. Brown."

"That was not much of an alteration."

"Very true, but I presume he thought it was sufficient."

"It was so, for the forgery being for a small amount, only fifty pounds, no attempt was made to pursue the fugitive."

"In the mines he prospered, and in time he accumulated an exceptional fortune."

"At last he returned to England, but made no effort to return to his relatives, still keeping his assumed name."

"His father was dead, and by the will the recreant son had been cut off with the traditional shilling."

"That embittered him against the rest of his relatives, of course," the *dansouse* opined.

"Yes; Talbot's father came in for all the family estates. But, Reginald was rich enough to need to laugh at his father's anger. His investments in England were successful. When he died, some ten years ago, he left an estate valued at a full million of pounds."

"Oh!" exclaimed the *dansouse*, "a sum like that is enough to take one's breath away!"

"He died without heirs, as far as any one knew, and the estate is now in chancery, waiting for the heir to appear."

"And that heir is Talbot Dunbarton, of course," the lady assumed.

"Oh, no, it isn't. Reginald Brown married a girl in the Western mining town where he built up his fortune. She was an actress, who came there with a traveling troupe."

"After a year the pair separated, for they did not get on together at all, but during that year a child was born—a daughter."

"Oh! and that child is heir to the estate?" the *dansouse* asked.

"Yes, I have secured all the proofs. It was the intention of her father to do justice to his child, for, on the day or so before his death, he told one of his associates that he had a child—a daughter—in America, and proposed to hunt her up and make her his heir."

"Death came to him abruptly, and, though,

before he had a chance to carry out his good intention. By accident I learned some of the particulars of the affair, and in the course of my wanderings I came to the very mining-camp in the West where the fugitive Englishman had made his success and his home for so many years."

"The story of Reginald D. Brown dying in the Old World, leaving a fortune of a million of pounds, I heard in England, so I took pains to make a memorandum of all the particulars as I always do in such notable cases, for there is no knowing when the knowledge may prove to be useful and of benefit to me."

"Then, in the mining-camp I learned how this same Brown rose to fortune, and from some of his chums discovered that this man's right name was Reginald Dunbarton."

"And, as you were acquainted with the history of the Dunbarton family, it did not take you long to get the hang of the affair," the *dansouse* intimated.

"You are right, for I am as quick as anybody in putting two and two together."

"Particularly when there is a chance to make a good bit of money by so doing, eh?"

"That was the incentive, of course," the lawyer acknowledged, with a crafty smile.

"After satisfying myself that there was no mistake about the matter—that the Reginald Dunbarton Brown of the Western mining-camp was the same person who had fled from England, Talbot Dunbarton's uncle, and the same Reginald D. Brown who had died in England leaving the million of pounds—I proceeded to discover what became of the wife and child."

"And did you succeed?" asked the *dansouse*, evidently intensely interested.

"Yes; it was an easy task enough. The mother, I found out, was dead, but the child, now a grown girl, was alive, and, like her mother, she was an actress."

"That was natural. It is a common thing for children, whose parents are on the stage, to follow the same life. It was so in my case," she informed.

"I can get all the proofs, and feel tolerably certain that I can make a clear case, but I am a little doubtful in regard to how it ought to be handled."

"Where is the girl?"

"Playing in the same company as yourself; she is Florence Ballentine!"

CHAPTER X.

A JEALOUS WOMAN.

HELENE MARZELLO started in surprise.

"Florence Ballentine?" she reiterated.

"That is correct," Luddingford assured.

"This girl, leading the precarious life of an actress, is undoubtedly the sole child of Reginald Dunbarton, who, dying as Reginald Brown, left a colossal fortune."

"It is a most astonishing thing!" the *dansouse* exclaimed, evidently deeply affected by the intelligence.

"Yes, it will be a great windfall for her. Of course, you understand that I am going into this affair with the expectation of making something out of it, and that is just where the puzzle comes in," Luddingford explained. "The secret is valuable to me only as long as it is a secret. Just as soon as I make known to the girl who her father was, and that she is the heir to his wealth, then, if she should take it into her head to dispense with my services, she could do so and I couldn't help myself."

"Of course, I know just how to go to work to prove that she is the heir, but if she was to employ a smart lawyer, he, by means of advertisements and investigations, would undoubtedly be able to get everything all straight."

"That is probable," Helene Marzello admitted, in an absent sort of way, speaking as if her thoughts were elsewhere.

"I am not satisfied, you know, to take a regular lawyer's fee in this matter, for I feel that I am entitled to a great deal more."

"You certainly are, I should say."

"But the trouble is to so arrange that I shall get a good stake, as these Americans say, out of the case—enough to make me a rich man."

"You are entitled to and ought to have a

considerable sum of money!" the *dansouse* averred.

"Let me see, now," she said, abruptly: "if it was discovered that this dead man, Brown, as he called himself, was in reality Reginald Dunbarton, Talbot's uncle, and he hadn't left any child, then Talbot would come in for his money?"

"That is the legal way to state it."

"What a pity you couldn't so arrange as to prove the dead man to be Talbot's uncle without saying anything about the daughter! I could then marry Talbot, have the handing of the five million, and be able to pay you richly for your trouble," the *dansouse* suggested—a peculiar look in her scintillant eyes.

The lawyer shook his head.

"Unfortunately, the affair cannot be arranged in that way, for, as we prove the identity of the two men, Dunbarton and Brown, some of the people who know the existence of the daughter will come forward. Could the case be kept out of the newspapers it would be all right; but, unfortunately, we cannot, for the particulars of such a strange family history as this are sure to be published far and wide. Taking it, therefore, all in all, it is an extremely difficult matter, and I do not see my way clear yet; and that is the main reason why I wanted to talk to you about the matter."

The *dansouse* rested her chin upon her hand and was bowed in thought for a few moments; then raising her head and fixing her eyes full upon the lawyer's face, she said:

"I have thought of a way, but it is full of difficulties and dangers."

"That doesn't trouble me in the least, provided there is a chance to make a good bit of money," Luddingford asserted promptly.

"There is a chance to make an enormous sum, if the idea I have succeeds—fifty thousand dollars at the least," she stated.

The eyes of the lawyer sparkled.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands gleefully. "A sum like that would indeed be worth the winning!"

"And would you be willing to face a deal of danger to secure it?"

"Would I? Just you give me the chance!" Luddingford urged. "Why, I would even face the hangman's rope!" he added, almost venomously.

"That is exactly what you will have to do," the *dansouse* assured, lowering her voice to a half-whisper, but speaking with perfect calmness.

"Well, I am ready to do it, if there is a chance to make fifty thousand dollars and a good opportunity for escape," the lawyer asserted without hesitancy.

"Understand! I think the matter can be arranged so that you will not actually have to commit an act that will criminate; but, as you will have to make all the arrangements, and so incur peril," Helene explained, "on you must devolve the peril."

"I will risk it, for I have faith that any scheme you may plan, is bound to succeed."

"It is my opinion that it will; but, a few words will explain:

"If this girl was dead, Talbot Dunbarton would be the heir to all his uncle's wealth."

"That is correct; there is no other heir."

"The man is crazy to marry me, and would do so to-morrow if I would consent," Helene asserted, in a business-like way. "Now, then, will it be so difficult a matter to arrange to put the girl out of the way?"

This terrible proposition was made in a deep half-whisper, but with not a quaver of voice.

"No, I do not think it will be difficult," the lawyer assured in the same cautious tone.

"The deed can be done before any move is made in regard to the estate," the woman explained; "and then, the girl being dead, you can set to work to prove that the man who died in England, calling himself Brown, was in reality Reginald Dunbarton, and that Talbot Dunbarton is his sole heir and successor."

"Of course; and I can do it without any trouble, provided I have money enough to enable me to go right ahead with the plan."

"I will provide you with all the cash you want, so go right ahead, as you wish."

"It is a bargain, then; and I will arrange

to have the only obstacle removed that can prevent the consummation of your scheme," Luddingford averred.

"No doubt but I can devise some method which can be worked with perfect safety."

"And as soon as the girl is disposed of I will marry this donkey of a Dunbarton, and then you can proceed to bring out the facts about the estate and heirship."

"I will do so."

"You need money, probably?" and taking out her pocketbook she counted fifty dollars into the lawyer's hand.

"Thanks, awfully! Now I will depart."

"Report progress!"

"I will," and he quitted the room.

"Now, you doll face beauty, your fate is sealed!" the danseuse cried, in almost fiendish glee.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE DIVE.

AFTER leaving the actress Luddingford walked slowly down the avenue, in deeply-musing mood.

The events of the morning certainly were well calculated to give him anxiety and alarm, but neither of these seemed to weigh upon his mind:—his thoughts were—the means now to adopt to carry out the monstrous compact he had entered into with that terrible and dangerous beauty.

As he walked and mused he almost ran against a man on the sidewalk, and, to his astonishment confronted an old London acquaintance—a tough-looking fellow with a face as hard as a pine-knot and a regular bulldog-like expression.

Instantly there was a mutual recognition.

"Why, if it ain't Lawyer Luddingford!" the other cried, in a voice which plainly proclaimed him to be a sport of the tough class.

"Well, Brum, how are you?" and the lawyer shook hands with the man.

"Middling—middling, thank you!"

The man was, indeed, a London crook, whom the lawyer once had for a client. Mike Welter was his appellation, but, as he came from the town of Birmingham, he had got the name of Mike, the Brum, a nickname commonly applied to the lads of the "hardware" town.

"You seem to be in fine feather," Luddingford suggested.

"Oh, yes, I am! and it is all on account of my being in this blooming country."

"How long have you been here?"

"Oh, a couple of years."

"I suppose you feel as much at home as in London, eh? Know all the blokes in the flash kens?"

"Oh, yes, I am posted, you bet your life!" responded the crook with a chuckle.

"Doing any crooked work now?"

"Oh, no, I am on the square—square as a die now. I am a pug."

"A prize-fighter?"

"Yes, and I get there, in great shape!"

The lawyer surveyed the well-built figure of the Englishman a moment and then said:

"You certainly look as if you were cut out for a boxer, and I don't doubt you can stand up with the best of them!"

"Oh, yes; but I don't make me bones by standing up, but I gits the cases for laying down, see?" the other replied with a grin.

"Do you mean that you make your money by 'throwing' fights?"

"That is my little game, and it works to a charm! I makes a match with a man whom I ought to be able to 'do' without any trouble, but, arter we gits in the ring, somehow or other the chap, arter a few rounds, which don't amount to nothing, gits in a lick on me jaw, and down I goes like a log; then they counts me out."

"It was just an accidental lick, you know," the bruiser continued, with a wink, "and 'most everybody feels sorry for me for having the bad luck to lose the fight by a fluke."

And then the boxer burst into a hearty laugh.

"That is what they call a 'barney,' eh?"

"Yes, and a-giving of them the dinky-dinks."

"I am glad I happened to meet you, Brum, because I want to have a little work done, and don't doubt that you can put me up to the time of day," Luddingford observed.

"Well, I will if I can, for you allers treated me in the squarest kind of way."

"It's a little bit of ugly business that requires a man with nerve, but with big pay for a good job."

"Oho! That's the lay! Well, you ought to be able to get a swiper for big pay without any trouble in this town."

"That is what I thought."

"Of course you don't want to be known in the thing?"

"Certainly not. It's for a client."

"I will tell you what I'll do," the boxer said, after thinking over the matter for a few moments; "you rig yourself out in some old togs to-night, and meet me at the corner of Chatham Square and Division street under the L Road station, you understand?"

"Yes; I know the place."

"Get yourself up like a tough, and take care to change your face somehow, as a disguise."

"Yes, I comprehend; fix myself so I will not be recognized by any one I may afterward meet."

"You think you can put me on the track of the man we want?"

"Not a bit of doubt about it," the boxer declared, emphatically. "I'll steer you into some of the worst dives you ever put your smeller into in your life."

"I tell you what, lawyer, it is about as bad as anything we have got in London, and we have got some mighty tough boozing-kens across the herring pond, as you pretty well know."

"At what time to-night shall I meet you?"

"'Bout ten; then the kens will be gitting lively, and the odds are big that when we get inter the quarry I can pick out a man to suit you."

The two parted, but at ten that night, prompt to the minute, Luddingford descended the steps from the Elevated Railway station at Chatham Square and Division street.

He wore a seedy suit of clothes, with an old slouch hat pulled down over his eyes, and a dark handkerchief tied around his neck in lieu of a collar.

By this simple change of attire it would have puzzled an intimate acquaintance to have recognized him.

The Brum, was waiting at the foot of the stairs, and though he glanced at the passengers as they descended yet he did not know the lawyer, and was considerably surprised when Luddingford greeted him.

"Blessed if I knowed ye!" the boxer exclaimed.

The Brum had also put on a common, rough suit which made him look like the average loungee always to be found in the cheap lodging-houses in that part of the city.

Down Catherine street the two went until they came to Cherry, into which they turned.

Proceeding a couple of blocks the Brum conducted the lawyer into a small saloon which presented but a poor appearance in comparison with the gaudily decked dance-house drinking-shops in the neighborhood.

"This 'ere place is called the Traveler's Rest," the boxer whispered as they crossed the threshold, "but a better name would be the Hotel de Crook, for 'bout nine out of every ten who hang out in the ken are on the cross."

The resort was to all appearances a very quiet place. Tables and chairs were scattered around the room, at which groups of low-browed, tough-looking men were seated. Some were playing cards, but the majority were conversing in a subdued manner, as though afraid their words might be overheard.

As the pair entered every eye in the place was immediately fixed on them.

"Do you see the blokes watching us? There ain't hardly a man in the room but is afeard that he is 'wanted' for something, and he has got his eyes skinned for a cop."

It was evident that the boxer was well acquainted, for he nodded right and left as his eyes roamed around the place.

The men at the tables withdrew their gaze as soon as they satisfied themselves that the two comers were of their own kind.

The bartender, a brutal-looking fellow, with the mark of the jail-bird written on his face, greeted the Brum cordially.

"Have you seen anything of Scissors to-night?" the boxer asked.

"No, he hasn't been in yet; he don't generally show up until about eleven, you see. You kin depend upon his coming in a half an hour at the latest," the bartender assured.

"Then we'll wait; so give us two beers," the boxer ordered, proceeding to a side-table, well back in the room.

After they were seated the boxer said:

"When you spoke to me 'bout a man, I couldn't fix my mind on the right cove, but arter thinking it over I thought of the very party who will do the job to the queen's taste, if the pay is one hundred."

"That's just what it will be," Luddingford assured, "if he fulfills the bargain we make."

"His name is Tommy Scissors, and he is a scissors-grinder—one of them fellers w'ot lugs a wheel 'round the streets, you know, but that is only a blind, you understand, for he is a regular cracksman and all around jobber."

"He is just the man for me, if he is that," the lawyer declared.

"I should say he is that. Couldn't hit a better lay, sir!"

At this point an undersized man, with a dark, brutal face, shabbily dressed, came slouching into the saloon.

"That is the bloke now!" the boxer whispered.

The new-comer was hailed by the bartender as soon as he entered, and directed to the table where the two sat.

He came slouching up, and surveyed the disguised lawyer with a curious stare.

"How's things?" asked the Brum.

"Infernal bad!" growled the ruffian.

"Have you taken any good tricks lately?"

"No, not one for a dog's age!" in a tone indicative of deep disgust. I tells you what it is, Brum, things ain't w'ot they used to be; the business is going to the dogs. A good man like myself stands no show nowadays," the fellow shook his head with a melancholy air.

"Have a beer with us?" the boxer inquired, as he and his companion drained their glasses.

"Bet your sweet life I will, seein' as my throat is as dry as an ash-heap!"

He took a seat at the table, the beers were brought and were quickly consumed. Then the boxer ordered three more.

"Brum, you are a jolly good feller and no mistake!" Scissors declared as he paid his respects to the beer.

"Say, pal, why wouldn't this friend of mine do for that piece of work you were talking about?" the boxer asked the lawyer, abruptly, as though the idea had just come to him.

"Well, he might do if he is willing to pick up a hundred," Luddingford responded.

"You ain't talking about a hundred bones?" asked Scissors, eagerly.

"Yes, sir; that is jest what we are a-saying—a hundred cold bones," the boxer averred.

"Say, old man, jest give me a chance to grab them, will you?"

"It is an ugly job," the lawyer said, in a half-whisper.

"That don't make no difference!" the fellow declared. "If there is a hundred chucks in it, I'm arter 'em, and you kin't skeer me off by talking about ugly."

Scissors spoke in the same cautious tone that the boxer had employed, and the three men now held their heads close together, after the fashion of the majority of the groups in the room.

"There's a little ugly business into it," the boxer reminded.

"That is all right; a man can't expect to pick up a hundred chucks for nothing," the ruffian replied.

"I don't mind a thing of that sort, provided that I stand a fair show of getting off arter the work is done."

"My pal here w'ot put onto the job by a nob up-town; but it wasn't in his line, he told the party he couldn't work it. He was anxious, though, to oblige the man, so he said as how he w'ot git some one for the job, and thout of me, but it ain't in my line."

"Well, it is in mine, and I'll be glad to take it for a hundred cases, if there is a fair

show to do the trick and not get pinched," the man avowed.

"That can be arranged all right," the lawyer assured.

"It is a woman who is to croak," Luddingford added, to sound his man fully.

"Man or woman, it is all the same; it's rather easier to lay a woman out, 'cos she can't make much of a fight."

"She must not have any chance to make a fight," the lawyer informed, authoritatively.

"You will have a splendid opportunity to get at her, for she is one of the actresses at the Academy of Music, and is in the habit of going home about midnight in company with another one of the stage girls."

"Why, this is just a picnic!" Scissors exclaimed, in seeming high glee.

"You must be careful, of course, not to strike the wrong girl, but you need make no mistake, for the right one is tall, with light hair, while the other is short and dark."

"Oh, you can bet your sweet life I will not make any mistake if you once point out the gal to me, so as I kin have a chance to see w'ot she is like."

"S'pose we go up to the Academy of Music right away, and then I can point her out to you as she leaves the theater."

"All right! That will be the ticket!" the ruffian asseverated.

"And, I say, w'ot is the matter with my pulling off the job to-night, if I kin git things fixed so I kin do it?"

"Scissors is just hungry to get his claws onto that hundred chunks!" the boxer assumed with a laugh.

"Jest bet your sweet life that I am," the tough assented.

"It is so long since I have seen a hundred cases all at once, that I declare I have almost forgotten how they look," he continued.

"Well, as far as I am concerned, the quicker I pay the money out the better. I will put up twenty-five now, and the balance when the job is done."

CHAPTER XII.

THE ASSAULT.

"THAT is O. K.!" the ruffian replied; whereupon the lawyer drew five five-dollar bills from his pocket and gave them to Scissors.

The ruffian clutched the money with an eager hand, stowed it away in his clothes, and the three proceeded to the street.

Walking to the L Road, they took an up-town train, and arrived in front of the Academy of Music just as the audience were coming out of the house.

"Just in time," the lawyer observed. "We will go around to the stage-door and keep watch until the party comes out. She lives on one of the side streets about a dozen blocks off."

"It is a narrow street, and at this time of night you will not encounter one man on the block. We can stand on the corner, and when the girls pass—as a rule she never has more than one with her—I will point her out to you."

"That's right!" Scissors exclaimed. "And arter I get an idea which one of the two is my mutton, I kin skip on ahead and lay in wait for her."

The audience soon passed out of the theater, and then the members of the company began to make their appearance.

The three watchers were keeping an eager gaze on the stage-door.

"There she is now!" the lawyer remarked as a half-dozen women came out of the portal—"the tall one with blond hair, wearing a blue dress and carrying a sachel."

"I see her," responded the would be assassin. "And you can bet your sweet life that I won't make no mistake 'bout the matter."

The tall girl with the blond hair, was Florence Ballentine, and her companion a brunette who played one of the small parts in the Black Crook.

The two girls passed so near the three men lounging on the corner, that they could have touched them by stretching out their hands. The actresses did not notice the street-loungers. They were so used to seeing men of all classes loafing in the neighborhood of the theater, that they paid no heed and walked on without looking to the right or left.

"In the second block above there are a lot

of tenement-houses of a poor character," the lawyer explained. "If you could arrange to do the work there, you could skip into one of the tenements after the thing was done, go up to the roof, pass over two or three houses, as they are all of a size, and then descend to the street."

"That's the idea!" the ruffian assented. "Even if there were blokes in the street, all ready to hound me down, the stair dodge would be sure to beat them."

"So long, old pals! I am off!" and he followed in the track of the girls, while the others crossed the street.

On went the procession. The actresses proceeded in blissful unconsciousness of their danger.

A half-block in the rear of the two ladies came the assassin, while a hundred yards behind Scissors, on the opposite side of the street, tramped the lawyer and the boxer.

When the actresses came to the small cross street on which their boarding-house was situated, they turned from the main avenue into it.

The ruffian then quickened his pace, and when he reached the corner he was only a hundred feet behind them.

He at once crossed the street, and it did not take him long to get a full block in advance of the girls. This done he recrossed to the side upon which the actresses were proceeding.

On that block was a row of tall tenements, regular six-story barracks, peculiar to the crowded metropolis.

These houses were in the middle of the block, the street-lamps at the ends, so the walk was rather dark at that particular point.

The street was deserted, for there was not a soul in sight but the five people engaged in that tragedy of the pave.

With a moment's observation of the surroundings, Scissors had decided his course of action.

The doors of the tenement-houses were open, so it was an easy matter for the ruffian to sneak into one of the dark entrances, which he did.

On came the girls engaged in a cheerful conversation. They tripped past the hallway where the assassin was hidden; then Scissors stole noiselessly out and after his prey, with the knife ready for the death-stroke.

A dozen steps, and he was within striking distance.

Miss Ballentine was on the inside, which circumstance favored the assailant, for it rendered it easier for him to escape into the nearby door.

A quick spring and up came the arm of the murderer for the stroke.

But the blow was never stricken, for, as he had tracked his destined victim, so he, too, was tracked!

In the doorway of the house adjoining the one where the ruffian had laid in ambush a man was standing, well within the entrance, where the shadows were deepest, and so the ruffian failed to notice him as he slunk past the hallway.

As he stole past, the man within caught sight of the knife gleaming in the ruffian's grasp, and the watcher well understood what it all meant. Instantly he stole out and followed the human wolf, and as Scissors raised his arm to deal the death-stroke, the stranger lightly sprung forward, seized the assassin's wrist, and, with a dextrous movement, so twisted the wrist that Scissors dropped the knife, with a moan of keenest pain, as if his arm had been broken.

With the fall of the knife the ruffian endeavored to grapple with the other, but, by a sudden and expert twist Scissors was thrown violently to the ground.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PALS INTERFERE.

AT the noise of the struggle the actresses turned in alarm, and recognizing their rescuer, they did not attempt to run away, but with intense anxiety, watched the result of the fight.

The struggle did not last long, for the moment the rescuer had the ruffian on the ground he rolled him over on his face and placing his knee in the small of Scissors's back,

with his hand encircling his neck, held him to the pavement with a grip of iron.

As soon as the two girls realized that the fight was over, and the ruffian helpless in the power of their deliverer, they recovered the use of their tongues.

"Oh, Mr. Blondell!" the pair said in chorus.

They had spoken the name aright; it indeed was Blondell, the Black Crook, who had come in such an unexpected manner to the rescue.

"Yes, the Black Crook, in his true character," he answered with a laugh.

Then the foiled ruffian made another desperate attempt to rise, but the Black Crook easily held him in his prostrate position.

"Be quiet, you scoundrell!" Blondell exclaimed, emphasizing the command by putting so much weight upon him that the fellow was almost crushed.

"Now, Miss Ballentine, do me the favor to scream at the top of your lungs, so as to give the alarm to the police and bring them to the scene of action."

The young lady had no difficulty in complying with the request.

Her shrill screams awoke the echoes of the quiet street.

A commotion immediately ensued. Windows were thrown up in all directions and white-robed figures appeared.

The lawyer and the boxer had watched the scene from afar, but now were so decidedly disconcerted by the turn of affairs, as not to know, for the moment, what to do.

"The blooming jig is up!" the Briton declared, angrily, but with whitened face, "but, pal, we have got to do something for him, hit or miss. That's what!"

"Yes, we ought to help if we can."

"S'pose we run over, and make believe that we think the man on top is abusing of the other, and cry out for him to be let up?" the pugilist suggested.

"That will do splendidly!" the lawyer assented.

"Come on, then, and if this bloke tries to cut up ugly I will do him up!" the boxer declared, venomously. "It's got to be did!"

The two immediately ran across the street and reached the group just as Miss Ballentine began to scream.

"W'ot is the matter 'ere? W'ot are you a-doing to the man? Why don't you let him up?" the Brum demanded, with the air of a man who owned the town.

"The man is a villain who tried to murder one of these young ladies," the Black Crook explained, "and if you are a good citizen I call upon you to lend me a hand in detaining him until the police put in an appearance."

"Oh, that is too blooming thin!" the boxer retorted. "You just let the man up and give him a chance for his life or I'll punch your head for you!" and the boxer made a blow at the young actor.

Blondell was too well versed in city life not to guess immediately that the two were pals of the prostrate man.

The odds were against him, but the resolute and trained athlete did not hesitate to embark at once in a struggle.

He avoided the blow by springing lightly to his feet. The blow was but a feint on the part of the Brum, for all he wanted was to give Scissors a chance to get up, which the ruffian proceeded to do with prompt alacrity.

The Black Crook, though, did not intend that his prey or the two pals should escape him, but to keep them all busy until the police should arrive; so the moment he was on his feet he made a rush for the boxer, and with a terrific "left-hander" on the Brum's neck, just under the ear, sent the bruiser to the ground, like an ax-stricken ox.

The boxer, unprepared for such an attack, got the awful lick under the ear even before he comprehended that the other intended to show fight.

Instantly the alert Blondell made a movement toward the disguised lawyer; but that circumspect villain had no wish to engage in a street fight, nor to be caught in such company, so he took to his heels as soon as the belligerent actor made toward him.

As the disguised rascal ran up the street he encountered a policeman, hurrying to the scene of the encounter.

Was he therefore disconcerted?

Not at all! He was too well versed in duplicity for want of a ruse.

"Oh, officer, hurry right along!" he exclaimed, "for there are three men fighting down the street, and I am afraid that murder will be done!"

"I'll be there in a twinklin'!" the officer, a big, red-whiskered Irishman, cried, and hastened on.

"Right this way!" exclaimed the disguised lawyer, turning, as if to retrace his steps.

In a few moments he allowed the officer to run away from him; then he crossed to the other side of the street and proceeded along at a slow pace, his idea being to remain in the neighborhood in order to see what became of the boxer and the tough, yet to so keep in the background as to avoid recognition by the man who had come to the rescue of the imperiled girl.

It does not take long to collect a crowd in the streets of the metropolis, even at the midnight hour; so, when the police reached the spot fully twenty people were gathered there.

Another policeman, from the opposite direction, arrived just after the Irishman.

Scissors had got upon his feet only to be promptly knocked down by the invincible Black Crook, who was fighting with the good purpose of holding his men right there.

By the time the policemen came up Blondell had knocked both ruffians down a couple of times, and as a natural result the men were pretty badly battered.

After giving the alarm the two girls had surveyed the struggle with intensest interest, as if fascinated by the really wonderful display of strength, courage and skill made by their champion and deliverer.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WARNING.

How chanced the young actor to be in the doorway of the tenement-house? does the reader ask? We will explain.

Just before the beginning of the last act, as Blondell left his dressing-room he encountered the French maid of the *premiere danseuse*.

The actor knew the girl by sight, from seeing the Frenchwoman in attendance on her mistress; but as he had never spoken to her, he was somewhat surprised when the maid approached him and said in a hurried, cautious way:

"I have an important communication to make to you—something to say of vital importance. Will you come to the address given on this card just as soon after the performance is over, as possible?"

The Black Crook, as may be surmised, was much surprised, but inferring from the woman's manner that she was deeply in earnest, and his curiosity being excited, he told her that he would accede to her wishes.

"Thanks! I assure you that you will not regret it!" and with this the maid hurried away.

After the play Blondell dressed for the street and proceeded at once to the address given.

It did not take him many minutes to walk from the Academy to the number indicated, and he found the house to be a tall tenement on one of the cross up-town streets.

As he approached the entrance door the woman made her appearance from the gloom of the entry.

"I waited for you so as to be able to conduct you to the room of my friend," the waiting-maid explained.

"She is a nurse, and is absent the greater part of the time, so when she is away I have the use of her room wholly to myself."

"We are old friends, you see. In France we were schoolmates; and, although years have passed since then, yet, when we met here, in this strange land, it was like the meeting of sisters, and she was glad to be able to be of service to me."

The Frenchwoman then conducted the Black Crook to an apartment on the second floor.

It was plainly furnished, but everything was as neat as burnished silver.

Marie, as the waiting-maid was called, brought a chair for the young actor, and requested him to be seated, and herself also taking a chair, she fixed her brilliant black eyes full on his fine face.

The waiting-maid was a pretty brunette of twenty-five or thereabouts—a good type of Gallic beauty, but upon her handsome face there now appeared a look of anxiety.

"Mr. Blondell, I don't doubt that this all appears to be very strange to you," she began, "but I assure you there is a good reason for it."

"I have no doubt in regard to that," he politely assured.

"In the first place, I must ask you to give me your word that you will not reveal to any one what there has been any communication between us," the Frenchwoman requested in an earnest way.

"You can depend upon my silence, madam," Blondell assured.

"I think it would be as much as my life was worth if my mistress knew that I held any communication with you, for she is of an extremely suspicious nature, and she would be sure to infer that I had gone out of my way to warn you."

"To warn me of what?" the Black Crook demanded.

"That she had fallen in love with you, and had made up her mind to keep you from going with any other woman."

Blondell pondered for a moment over the matter.

"Well, I had an idea from a brief conversation with the German, Von Silbon, that your mistress had taken a fancy to me," he said at last; "but, as I took pains to speak plainly about the matter, I did not think I would hear any more about it."

"You do not know the madame," the Frenchwoman replied. "I have been with her five years, and, although, of course, she does not trust me with any of her secrets, yet I know that, when she takes an idea in her head, she is not the woman to hesitate no matter what obstacles are in the way."

"Well, I don't believe she can make me marry her unless I wish so to do," the actor observed with a smile.

"That is true, of course, but I wished to warn you to be on your guard. At present, my mistress is furiously jealous of Miss Ballentine, for she thinks that she is your sweetheart, and if she could secretly do her a mischief, I do not believe she would hesitate for a moment to do it."

Blondell looked grave at this remarkable revelation.

"That is not true; there is no love affair between Miss Ballentine and myself, and I hardly think your mistress would dare to injure her in any way."

"She would if she could do so without danger of being found out!" the Frenchwoman declared.

"This is all I wished to say—to warn you. Now, you can be on your guard, and I trust you will say nothing that will betray me."

"Rest assured of that!" Blondell replied, as he rose to depart. "Your confidence is secure with me—as it ought to be."

"If I learn anything of importance I will communicate with you," the woman added.

The Black Crook, thanking her, descended the stairs to the lower hall, and, approaching the front door, beheld the scene we have described—the passing of the two young stage-ladies and the wolfish brute, knife in hand, in pursuit.

Truly, a providential coincidence!

"There may be luck and chance and Fortune's hap,

But never a Providence shall stand!
Nay! Here's a charge that no unbelief shall sap

Of guidance of God's Hand."

And so the rescued innocents most fervently believed.

CHAPTER XV.

THE EXAMINATION.

The arrival of the policemen put an end to the struggle.

Although there were two against one, the result of the fight, if no interference had come, was not, for a moment, in doubt.

Both the boxer and the ruffian were nearly done for when the Metropolitan arrived, while the young actor was almost as fresh as when the affair commenced.

"Phat the devil's the matter?" the red-whiskered policeman demanded, swinging his club as though he felt it essential to bring it down on the head of somebody.

"This man here," and the Black Crook

pointed to Scissors, "attempted to kill one of these young ladies with a knife, but I happened to be standing in a doorway, saw what the scoundrel was up to, and interfered just in time."

"I struck the knife from his hand—you will find it in the gutter somewhere—and knocked him down so as to hold him until assistance arrived."

"Then this other man came up, demanded that I should allow the ruffian to rise, and immediately proceeded to make an attack on me, so it is evident that he is a pal of the fellow who wanted to commit the murder."

"That is a lie!" the boxer cried, in a sulky way. "I never saw the man before in all my life!"

"And I didn't go for to stab no gal, either!" Scissors protested. "It is all a blamed lie. I was walking quietly along, a-minding of my own business, when this here man jumps out at me with a knife. I s'posed he wanted to rob me, and I clinched with him so he couldn't use the knife, but he got me down and was a-hammering of me when this here gent came up," and he nodded to the boxer.

"He axed him to let up, but he wouldn't have it, but went in to do the pair of us up. I reckon he is crazy!" the tough announced, in conclusion, with a protesting shake of the head.

"Here is a knife!" exclaimed one of the bystanders, who had picked the ugly-looking weapon out of the gutter, and as he spoke he handed the knife to the policeman.

"That is it!" Scissors exclaimed. "That is the very knife with which he tried to rip me open!"

"I tell you what it is, officer, he is giving it to you as straight as a string!" the boxer declared.

"I was a-coming up on the other side of the street and saw this here man," and he pointed to the young actor, "pitch onto t'other chap."

"I don't know either one of them from a side of sole-leather, you understand, but it is the most natural thing in the world for me to help the under dog in the fight; so I went in to help him out, seeing that he was down, with the other man a-hammering of him!" and the boxer wound up with a great show of indignation.

"Oh, sir, you must not believe what this man says!" Miss Ballentine now interposed, unable to keep silent any longer. "He is not telling you the truth, for, although this gentleman had thrown the other man to the ground, he did not attempt to strike him. All he desired to do was to hold on to him until my screams summoned the police so that he might be given into custody."

"And this gentleman did not have the knife, either," the brunette actress averred, at this point.

"I don't know, of course, whether the man intended to attack us or not, but when we turned around this man," and she indicated Scissors, "certainly had the knife in his hand, and he only dropped it when he was forced to do so by this gentleman's twisting his wrist; then he was thrown to the ground, and held there until this other man," and she pointed to the boxer, "came up and endeavored to get the assassin away."

During this explanation the second policeman, who was an intelligent fellow, known as James Sullivan, had been making a critical examination of the ruffian.

"What is your name, my man?" he asked, abruptly.

"O'Toole—Billy O'Toole," the tough answered without a moment's hesitation, giving the first name which came into his head.

The policeman gave vent to a scornful laugh.

"Oh, yes; the woods are full of such O'Tooles as you are!" the officer declared.

"No, no, my man, that little dodge is altogether too thin, and it will not work. I thought I recognized you right at the beginning, and now I am sure of it!"

"Your name is Tommy Creedle, better known to your pals as Scissors, a low-grade crook, who has been more times in jail than you have fingers and toes."

"Tain't so! I ain't the man, and it is a blamed shame for you to go and take a cove's character away!" the tough protested, with a fine show of indignation.

"Ah, come off! You can't play any roots

on me!" the officer, like a book, now took a good, square look over five years since concerned in the Fifth avenue."

"That is a blamed promptly and defiantly."

"You see, officer, up with some other man at all," he exclaimed.

"Phat is the up about the policeman now will be after lugging house, and there to the sergeant to"

"That's the coincidence."

"You and the along, too, sir, so a the men," the officer actor.

"I am quite with the ladies will no some inconvenient cause of justice," cheerfully.

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on me!" the officer retorted. "I know you like a book, now that I have had time to get a good, square look at you, although it is over five years since I arrested you for being concerned in that house-breaking job in Fifth avenue."

"That is a blamed lie!" the crook asserted promptly and defiantly.

"You see, officer, you have got me mixed up with some other fellow, and I ain't the man at all," he explained.

"That is the use of wasting toime in talking about the matter?" the red-whiskered policeman now urged, impatiently. "We will be after lugging you off to the station-house, and there ye'll have a chance to talk to the sergeant to your heart's content."

"That's the ticket!" the other policeman coincided.

"You and the ladies will have to come along, too, sir, so as to make a charge against the men," the officer remarked to the young actor.

"I am quite willing to go, and I presume the ladies will not object to put up with some inconvenience in order to serve the cause of justice," the Black Crook responded cheerfully.

Now, although the girls were in public life, and accustomed to facing large audiences, yet they had all the natural disinclination of their sex to appearing in a police court; but the Black Crook put the case in such a way that they did not like to refuse; so they said they would go.

"It is a blamed outrage!" the boxer declared, but, as he was old stager enough to understand that it would be a mere waste of words to attempt to persuade the officers not to carry out their purpose, he said no more.

The procession took up the line of march to the police station, and, once there, the sergeant in command recognized both of the prisoners.

And after the actresses and Blondell told their stories, he shook his head and remarked:

"Scissors, this is a mighty serious charge against you, this time."

"It is all blamed nonsense!" the ruffian avowed, indignantly.

"Just think the matter over and you will see, sergeant, that I had no call to want to knife either of these gals."

"Say, did you ever see me before?" and he addressed the remark to the two actresses.

They shook their heads.

"Neither one on you ever set your peepers on me in your life!" Scissors cried.

"That is a mighty good point for me, isn't it, sergeant? Why should I want to put a knife in a gal w'ot I don't know?"

"I am not very good at conundrums, Scissors," the official remarked, with a grim smile. "And I don't think I will worry myself much by attempting to guess the one which you have just given me."

"I might suggest a couple of motives, though: the first is that you were hired to attack the young ladies by some enemy of theirs; the second, that you had an idea that you could frighten them into giving up their valuables."

A look of amazement came over the faces of the two actresses as they listened to the sergeant's speech.

"Oh, sir, I don't think I have an enemy who is wicked enough to wish to take my life," Miss Ballentine assumed.

"And I feel quite sure that I haven't!" her companion echoed.

"There, do you hear w'ot the ladies says?" the ruffian exclaimed; "can't you see, sergeant, that this here thing is all a mistake? If the ladies haven't got an enemy it stands to reason that nobody could have hired me to knife 'em; and, as for trying to frighten 'em out of their valuables, you kin see for yourself, sergeant, that they don't, either one of them, wear any sparklers, or have the appearance of carrying around a bagful of gold."

The girls could not forbear smiling at this, for both wore plain dresses on the street, always, and their appearance, apart from their good looks, was not calculated to attract particular attention.

"Well, as I remarked before, this is a conundrum, and I don't propose to waste time in endeavoring to guess it," the sergeant

observed. "There seems to be good cause to hold you, and I shall do it."

"How 'bout me, sergeant?" the boxer asked. "Nobody can say that I had anything to do with assaulting the gals, so you ought not to hold me."

"Sergeant, I don't think there is a doubt but what this man had something to do with the affair!" the Black Crook asserted.

"That's a blamed lie!" the Brum retorted, indignantly.

"He, with a companion, were on the other side of the street, and it seems to me just as though they were there for the purpose of watching the attack, in order to be sure the job was done."

"Of course, I don't know why anybody should wish to assault either one of the two ladies but I am perfectly satisfied that the scheme was arranged, and that this ruffian was to carry it out."

"My accidental presence in the neighborhood upset the job; but, just as soon as I had made a prisoner of this fellow with the knife the other two ran across the street, and, without attempting to inquire into the merits of the case at all, tried to rescue the man, so that it surely seems as if this cut-throat and the other one who escaped arrest were concerned in the matter."

"There is considerable mystery about the case," the sergeant inferred; "and, under the circumstances, I don't propose to make any decision."

"I think there is cause to hold both of you, and I am going to do it. Take the pair to the lock-up!" the sergeant ordered.

And immediately both "old stagers" were marched to the rear, escorted by a couple of stalwart policemen.

Blondell and the two actresses, giving their address to the sergeant, were duly warned by him to be sure and be on hand to appear against the two culprits in the morning at the police court, which the three promised, and then took their departure.

CHAPTER XVI.

A CONSULTATION.

ALL concerned in the street affray made their appearance promptly in the police court the morning following.

The presiding justice, after listening to the evidence, fined the boxer ten dollars for assault and battery, and ordered that Scissors be held for trial on a charge of assault with intent to kill.

Unluckily for the pair, they had been brought before the most severe judge in the city—a "justice" who prided himself upon being able to strike terror to the hearts of the evil-doers.

Then, too, the judge knew Scissors, for it was in his court once that the ruffian had been "put away" for a couple of years for being concerned in a house-breaking affair; therefore the justice had a bad opinion of the man, and that had a deal to do with his promptly deciding to hold him for trial.

A noted criminal lawyer now came forward and announced that he had been retained to defend the prisoners.

When the fine was imposed on the Brum, the lawyer paid the money, and, as soon as the judge declared that he would hold Scissors, the learned gentleman asked if the man could not be bailed.

The judge responded in the affirmative, but, as he did not think that Scissors was a man who ought to be at large, he fixed the amount of the bail at five thousand dollars.

The counsel said he was astonished at the largeness of the sum, but his protestations did not induce the judge to alter the amount; so the ruffian was carried off to a dungeon cell, for the lawyer declared that it would not be possible for his friends to give bonds for so large a sum.

The two actresses and Blondell left the court-room in company and, proceeding up-town together, discussed the affair.

"I do not understand it at all!" Miss Ballentine averred. "Surely, there isn't any one in the world who hates me bitterly enough to strike at my life?"

"Oh, no, my dear Florence, I don't believe there is," cried the black-eyed brunette, who was called Amy McKellum.

"I must think the man only intended to rob you," the young actor asserted. "From what the judge said, as well as from the way

in which he treated him, I got the impression that the fellow is a hard case. It is my impression that he has played the spy upon you two, ascertained that you were in the habit of going home alone, without an escort, and got the idea into his head that it would be an easy matter to rob you of your valuables."

"It is a common impression among men of this fellow's class that the women of the stage are always well provided with jewelry, diamonds galore, and all that sort of thing, and he doubtless supposed that if he suddenly accosted you with a demand for your valuables, and flashed a big knife in your faces, you would be immediately frightened into compliance."

"He would have been much disgusted with the amount of the plunder even if he had succeeded in getting from us all we had," Miss Ballentine observed, laughing.

"I only had about a dollar in change in my pocket, and wore no jewelry at all," the lively brunette added.

Leaving the theatrical people to go on their way we will turn our attention to the English lawyer, Luddingford.

After the failure of the scheme to murder the girl, and as soon as the Englishman saw the Brum and Scissors lugged off by the police he hastened to his home.

He had a furnished room on the East Side of town, near the Jewish Quarter, and as it was in a tenement-house, where all sorts of people were passing in and out all the time, no one was likely to pay attention enough to him to note that he had assumed a disguise.

Hastily removing the coarse clothes he soon appeared like himself again.

Then he hurried up-town to the Hotel de Paris.

Although it was late he knew the habits of the ballet queen well enough to feel sure of being able to see her before she retired to rest, for he understood that she rarely went to bed until half-past one or two o'clock.

When he sent up his card word was returned immediately to show him up.

When the lawyer entered Marzello's parlor he found the *danseuse* alone.

From the lateness of the call Helene surmised that Luddingford had something of importance to communicate; she therefore had dismissed the maid.

"I tried to work a little scheme to-night, but did not succeed," Luddingford began his explanation at once, and proceeded to tell the whole story.

The *danseuse* listened attentively.

"What a strange chance that Blondell should have happened to be near at hand to rescue the girl!" Helene observed.

"Yes, it was odd, and particularly unfortunate, too, for the circumstance, of course, will serve to bind the pair together, more closely than ever."

"Perhaps; but we will be the shears of fate to separate the two!" the *danseuse* declared with a frown and baleful glint of the eye.

"You are not discouraged, then, on account of the failure of the first attempt?"

"Oh, no," Helene assured. "And if it was the tenth failure instead of the first I would not despair. You must set your wits to work and try again!" she insisted.

"I will. You can rely upon that. But, now, madame, I must, in honor, as my tools were caught in the net, get them out, you know; that is the first thing to do."

"Of course; and that will cost money, but I do not grudge it, for your accomplices did their best, and the failure is through no fault of theirs."

"Will a hundred dollars answer?" and as she spoke she drew out a roll of bank-bills.

"Oh, yes; that will be ample for the present. I will have to engage a lawyer, you know."

"The Brum is true blue, and, as he will undoubtedly get off with a light fine there is no danger of his betraying me, and the other man can't if he was inclined to do so, for he does not know anything about me, so all may yet be well."

"Lose no time in hatching a new scheme!" the *danseuse* enjoined, as the lawyer rose to depart.

"And take no heed, mind! in regard to the expense."

"Yes, yes, I shall remember. Never fear but what I will do the trick, somehow!"

And Luddingford took his leave.

CHAPTER XVII.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

AFTER he returned to his lodging-room, the lawyer took a seat in a rocking-chair, lit his pipe and fell to cogitating. He was racking his brains to devise a plan by means of which the young actress could be removed.

"It is a mighty difficult problem to solve," he muttered, after a while. "To kill any one is not such a hard matter, but to do it so that no one could find out who committed the act is quite another thing."

For a good hour the lawyer smoked and plotted, until at last his brain grew weary.

"I can't hit upon anything to-night!" he exclaimed. "Possibly by to-morrow I may be more fortunate. But this is certain: I must find a way to do the trick. It is my one chance for a big fortune. Yes, it must be done!"

Then he went to bed.

He was up betimes in the morning, anxious not to be late for the court proceedings, which we already have chronicled.

The theatrical colony of the metropolis was well represented in the court-room, for it did not take long for the report that the lives of two of the Black Crook actresses had been attempted to circulate around town.

As Luddingford left the hall of justice, after the examination was over, he encountered Von Silbon, and together the two proceeded up-town.

Leaving the car at Fourteenth street, they walked on toward the Academy of Music.

In crossing Fourth avenue the gaudy posters displayed on the front of the Dime Museum, east of Fourth avenue, attracted their attention.

One gayly-illuminated "poster" in particular caught their eyes. It represented a party of rather undersized wild black men dancing around the form of a prostrate enemy. On the top of the poster, in great red and black letters, appeared the inscription:

"THE ROYAL TROUPE OF AUSTRALIAN BUSHMEN."

"Just look at the black beggars!" Von Silbon exclaimed.

"It is a remarkably life-like picture!" the lawyer responded.

"Is that true? Why, I had an idea that it was only a make-up dodge."

"Oh, no; it is true to life."

"You are posted, then, in regard to the subject?"

"Oh, yes; I have been in Australia."

"Yes? I was not aware of the fact."

"It is true. I have been a great wanderer, you see—a regular globe-trotter, seeking my fortune all over the world, and as I heard good reports of Australia, I went to that country; but, however good it may be for other people, I met with only bad luck during my sojourn there."

"In the first place, I was shipwrecked on the coast."

"Well, that was certainly unlucky!" Silbon exclaimed.

"I will tell you how it was. When I started for Australia I was short of funds, but was fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of the master of a trading-ship bound to that country, and I made an arrangement with him for my passage."

"The captain was a grizzled old sea-dog who had followed the water, man and boy, as he expressed it, for forty years, and the old fellow had taken the notion into his head to write a book detailing his adventures."

"Ah, yes, and that must have been a difficult task for a man of that kind, for the hands used to handling a tarred rope would not be apt to take kindly to a pen."

"You are right; the captain could tell his story all right, but it was hard work for him to set the facts down upon paper, so I contrived to make a bargain with him."

"I was to do the writing of the book, receive a free passage to Australia and a certain sum of money upon arriving there."

"That was quite a windfall for you."

"Oh, yes, it was apparently a very good thing, but for the last ten years I have been rather unlucky in all my undertakings, and

on this occasion the fickle goddess, Dame Fortune, dealt me another buffet.

"Just as soon as we arrived in sight of the Australian coast a fearful storm arose, and in spite of all the efforts of the officers and crew the ship went on a chain of reefs a half-mile or so from the shore; I was the only man on board that ill-fated craft who reached the land to tell the tale of the disaster."

"That was a fearful tragedy indeed," the German remarked. "And you were remarkably lucky to have succeeded in escaping with your life."

"Yes, it is a singular thing in connection with my adventures, that, though I have had some very narrow escapes yet I always manage to pull through, somehow."

"But in this instance, it was out of the frying pan into the fire, for I had been unlucky enough to be shipwrecked on a coast occupied by one of the wildest tribes of blacks on the great island, a lot of low, mean, miserable savages who fairly hated the sight of a white man."

"I have read accounts of the blacks, and travelers agree in saying that they are about the most dangerous of all the tribes of savages known to civilized man."

"That is correct, and there is no doubt the miserable little black scoundrels would have put me to death, after they had enjoyed the pleasure of torturing me for awhile, if a really brilliant idea had not occurred to me."

"When I was a lad, I had a great admiration for magicians and sleight-of-hand performers, so I learned to do all sorts of tricks, and in this hour of danger the remembrance came to me of the accounts which I had read how men who were able to perform a few simple tricks had excited the awe and admiration of the savages by displaying their skill in this line."

"Ah, yes; that was a capital idea!"

"My dear fellow, it came to me on the spur of the moment. These savages had never seen tricks of the kind, and when I pretended to swallow a wild pear and then sneeze it out of my nose their wonder and admiration knew no bounds."

"Really now, a scheme of that sort under such circumstances was a brilliant stroke of genius," Von Silbon declared.

"It certainly saved my life, for the little black scoundrels got the idea into their nodules that I was a superior being, and so they did all in their power to make me comfortable."

"There was a half-a-dozen of the savages who could speak a little English, so I managed to get along very well with them."

"How long were you compelled to remain with the black rascals?"

"About three months, so I had ample opportunity to become well acquainted with their manners and customs."

"Then the tribe moved to the neighborhood of the white settlements, and, as I had never manifested any desire to escape, they got the idea that I was perfectly satisfied to remain with them."

"That gave you an opportunity to get out, and you improved it between two nights, I suppose," Silbon remarked.

"Yes, I did; they kept a watch upon me, but not a strict one, and so I succeeded in making my escape; then as I soon discovered that there was not much chance for a man like myself to make anything in Australia I left the country after a few weeks."

"These fellows, though, recall my Australian experience, and I have a curiosity to see them."

"Will you come in with me?"

Von Silbon consulted his watch.

"You will have to excuse me, for I haven't time, as I have an appointment to meet a Californian manager at the Academy of Music in ten minutes."

"Allons, then!" Luddingford remarked.

The two separated; Von Silbon went on down the street, while the lawyer entered the museum.

The bushmen gave their exhibition on a platform in the main hall, appearing for about fifteen minutes every hour during the time when visitors were admitted to the building.

They were just commencing their performance when Luddingford joined the throng clustered around the platform.

The lecturer, whose duty it was to give a description of all the freaks and curiosities upon exhibition, gave a really interesting lecture upon the manners and customs of the Australian blacks.

The lecture called to Luddingford's mind the incidents attending his captivity among the savages, and then as he surveyed the bushmen, he became impressed with the idea that one of the men was a member of the tribe who had captured him.

The man had aged greatly, though, during the few years that had elapsed since the lawyer dwelt in the huts of the bushmen.

"That is the old rascal, though; there is not a doubt of it!" Luddingford muttered.

"I wonder if the old scoundrel drinks as much rum as he used to do in the old days in the bush?"

"A more inveterate soaker I never met."

And then as he gazed upon the bushmen and meditated upon the events of the past, a sudden idea came to him.

An idea so monstrous that for a moment a feeling of horror came over him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HALA HULA.

"No, no," he murmured, "it will not do!"

Then he meditated for a few moments with knitted brows.

"But why not?" he queried, at last.

Luddingford was standing in the back-ground, under the balcony, close to the wall.

All of the audience were in front of him, with their attention directed to the bushmen, and the lecturer, so no one took any notice of him.

"It can be done, I think," the lawyer continued, his face dark with gloomy thoughts. "It is a horrible way, of course; but what does it matter? All roads lead to Rome, so the old saying goes, and all life-paths certainly lead to death, so what difference how the end comes?"

Luddingford brooded over the idea which had come into his mind until the exhibition of the bushmen came to an end.

This was the close of the performance in the main hall, and the audience soon deserted it for the theater.

The blacks remained upon the platform, and when the lawyer advanced to it one of the bushmen, a wrinkled old fellow, who looked about as much like a huge ape as a human, recognized him immediately.

The black advanced to the edge of the platform, and squatted down so as to bring himself on a level with the visitor.

The rest of the bushmen were at the other end of the platform, congregated in a group, and they paid no attention to their companion's movements.

"Hala Hula?" said Luddingford.

"Yes, yes, me Hala Hula," the black replied, speaking English quite plainly, and as he spoke he extended his hand and gave the lawyer's a hearty shake.

"You are about the last man I expected to see!" Luddingford declared. "How did you happen to come so far from home?"

"Makee money!" replied the black, with a prodigious grin.

"And more money means more rum, eh?"

"Yes, yes—rum good—much good!" and the black smacked his lips with an appearance of great gusto.

"Do you get all the rum you want since you came into the land of the white man?"

"No, no; not much rum," and the black shook his head while a sad expression appeared on his face; "only a pint a day."

"Only a pint?"

"That is all—not much," and again the old bushman shook his head in a melancholy way.

"Well, a pint is hardly enough for a man who possesses such a tremendous swallow as yourself. Why, I have known you to get away with a quart, and it did not trouble you to walk off with it either."

And this was the truth; the old black could drink enough liquor to upset half a dozen common men, and yet not be rendered incapable of taking care of himself.

"No, no; rum heap good!" ejaculated the black, with a grunt, and then he rubbed his stomach.

"You are right, a shame a man have should be whisky a day."

"Pint no good!"

"Is it your short allowance?"

The black nodded.

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"You are right, old chap, and I think it is a shame a man with such a swallow as you have should be restricted to one little pint of whisky a day."

"Pint no good!"

"Is it your manager who put you on such short allowance?"

The black nodded assent.

"It is a blooming shame!" the lawyer declared. "And for the sake of old times I don't mind giving you a good 'rouse' if the thing can be arranged."

"You stop at some boarding-house, I suppose?"

"Yes, in de odder street," and the bushman pointed to the rear of the museum.

"Directly back of the theater—across the street."

The bushman nodded.

"Well, now, I will tell you what I will do," the lawyer remarked after a moment's pause, during which he appeared to be reflecting upon the matter.

"I will smuggle a quart of whisky into your boarding-house for you."

"Dat is good!" exclaimed the black, and he rolled his eyes in delight.

"But we will have to arrange it in some way so that your manager will not know anything about the matter, for he would undoubtedly cut up rusty if he should get an idea that anybody was supplying you with liquor," Luddingford remarked.

"Yes, he would no like it."

And the black shook his head in a disconsolate way.

"But I intend that you shall have your rum, all the same, and I don't care whether he likes it or not!" the lawyer declared.

"Dat is good!" the black exclaimed. "Me love rum—not little rum, but big rum."

"Do you go home for your supper?"

"Oh, yes."

"You are away for about an hour, I suppose?"

The black nodded assent.

"Well, I think the affair can be arranged in this way:

"When you go to the boarding-house for your supper you must pretend that you don't feel well; don't eat much supper; say you haven't any appetite, and then, after supper is over, and the time comes for you to return to the museum, you must pretend to be so sick that you cannot stir out of the house."

"Yes, yes, me do it," and the black grinned and nodded in a sly way.

"Then the troupe will have to come without you. The entertainment commences about seven in the evening, I believe, and lasts until ten?"

"Yes, dat is right."

"That will give us ample time to have a first-class spree!" the lawyer observed, while the black chuckled and grinned.

"I will watch outside of the house until I see that your companions are out of the way, and then I will come and ask to see you. I don't suppose that there will be any difficulty about getting in, for the boarding-house people will not be apt to stop me."

"No, no, you come in all right."

"Very well, then; you work the game as I have planned it, and to-night we will have a jolly time."

"Yes, plenty rum."

"I will bring a quart with me!" Luddingford declared.

Then he shook hands again with the black and sauntered off.

He did not tarry in the museum, but proceeded at once to the street.

There was an earnest look on his face, for the scheme which he had formed was truly a horrid one, and although the plotter felt certain that it could be worked all right, yet, totally unscrupulous as he was, he felt a little reluctance to embarking in it.

"I am a fool," he muttered, as he proceeded along Fourteenth street toward the East Side, where he had his lodging-room.

"Here is a chance for me to make an enormous stake," he continued, musingly.

"One bold move and I can clutch money enough to make me independent for life."

"Why, then, should I hesitate? I would be the greatest kind of an ass not to seize upon this opportunity to rise superior to the frowns of fortune."

"It is true that I have never committed a

crime of the kind, but then no such chance ever came in my way before.

"Besides, is it not the truth that I only plan the deed, this miserable wretch of a black being the one who executes the work?"

"That is so, and I would be a fool indeed to allow this chance to escape."

By such specious arguments did the wily lawyer screw his courage up to the sticking point, so as to be able to proceed with the monstrous crime which his plotting brain had conceived.

At half-past six o'clock that evening Luddingford made his appearance at the corner of Thirteenth street and Fourth avenue, taking up a position so he could command a view of the boarding-house.

Not being positive in regard to the exact time when the bushmen would depart for the theater, the lawyer came early so as to be sure not to miss them.

He had not been on the watch for more than ten minutes when the blacks came out.

They were escorted by the genial Englishman, Johnny Roach, whose acquaintance the reader will doubtless remember he made in one of the early chapters of our tale.

The troupe passed almost within reach of the watching lawyer, so he had a good opportunity to inspect them.

"Aha! the old black rascal, Hala Hula, is not there!" Luddingford muttered, as the party proceeded up Fourth avenue.

"He has worked the trick all right!" the lawyer continued, with a smile of grim satisfaction.

"And now the question is, will I be able to persuade the old rascal to do the job?"

"The only thing which will deter him will be the fear of getting caught, but I think I can persuade him that there isn't much danger."

"I will be with him, and that fact will go far to convince him that the risk is small, for he knows me well enough to know that I am not the kind of man to heedlessly run into danger."

Luddingford waited until he thought the blacks had time to get into the museum, and arrange themselves on their platform, then he crossed the street and rung the door-bell of the boarding-house with the air of a man who felt perfectly sure of his reception.

When the servant came to the door he announced that he had come to see the sick bushman.

This led the girl into the error of thinking that he was a doctor, particularly as he had the appearance of a professional man.

So she conducted him at once to the apartment occupied by Hala Hula.

The old black was extended on the sofa with a towel around his head, and he gave vent to a dismal groan when the girl ushered the supposed doctor into the room.

"A little under the weather, eh?" the schemer exclaimed, in imitation of the cheerful manner which a great many doctors assume upon entering a sick-room.

"But I do not believe that it amounts to anything. A little fit of indigestion, and a few doses of medicine will soon put you on your legs again."

This was said for the express purpose of reaching the ears of the girl as she departed.

The moment the door closed behind the girl there was a wondrous change in the manner of the old black.

He tore the towel from his head and sent it flying across the room, then he sprang up, grabbed Luddingford by the hand and shook it heartily.

"Me glad to see you—me just hungry for rum!" the old fellow exclaimed.

"I have got the stingo all right!" the lawyer declared, producing a pint flask.

A disconsolate look appeared on the old man's face.

"Me want more than a pint!" he declared.

"Oh, that is all right!" Luddingford responded with a laugh.

"I am not going to put you on a short allowance. I told you that I would bring a quart, and in a matter of this kind you can always depend upon me."

Then the lawyer produced another pint flask.

The eyes of the old black glistened and he smacked his lips loudly.

"Aha! two bottles! dat is good! Hala Hula loves rum."

"Sit down and we will have a rouse which

will make your hair curl!" the lawyer declared.

Then the pair proceeded to enjoy the potent fluid contained in the flask.

Luddingford took his liquor in a glass, but the black disdained this device of an effete civilization, and in a couple of minutes finished the contents of the flask.

"Well, old fellow, you certainly have not forgotten how to drink!" the lawyer exclaimed.

"No, no, me drink all right—more?" and the black extended his hand for the other bottle.

Luddingford extended it to the old fellow, and it only took the black a few minutes to send the second pint after the first.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, smacking his lips, "why you no bring more?"

"I know of a game which you can play which will bring you money enough to buy a barrel of rum!" the lawyer exclaimed, and then he unfolded his scheme.

The old bushman was just in the condition to agree to almost anything, and so an agreement was soon reached.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE STAGE-BOX.

HALA HULA was dressed in a plain, dark business-suit when in private life, reserving his savage costume for his stage appearances.

So when he was ready for the street with his low stature and short, bushy beard, he presented the appearance of an ordinary undersized negro, such as are to be encountered every day in the streets of the metropolis.

Luddingford had secured one of the stage-boxes at the Academy of Music, and had taken the precaution to put on a light overcoat.

On arriving at the door of the theater he removed his overcoat and gave it to the bushman, having previously instructed him in regard to the part which he was to play.

The two passed into the theater, and one of the ushers conducted the Englishman to his box, the bushman following demurely along in the rear with the coat, just as a negro servant could have done.

Luddingford had taken the precaution to engage the whole box so that no one could intrude upon him.

The overture had just commenced as the two entered the box, so Luddingford had time to make the arrangements which he had in view before the performance commenced.

He arranged the chairs for himself and his companion so they were concealed from the sight of the audience; and the people upon the stage only had a partial view of them.

In fact, the black was almost completely hidden, being enveloped in the folds of the curtain.

The overture came to an end and the play began.

It proceeded on this evening without any incident out of the common occurring until the performance was half over, and then, as Miss Ballentine, in her stage character of Amina, was making an exit, passing within a couple of yards of the box wherein sat the Englishman and the bushman, she suddenly uttered a low cry and struck her hand against the side of her neck.

Hardly one in a hundred of the vast audience noticed the movement, for she was almost off the stage when it occurred, and about all eyes were fixed on the dancing-girls who had just come trooping upon the stage.

The people in the stage entrance, though, noticed that something was amiss, and the old stage manager, ever eager to get a chance to find fault, and who happened to be in the entrance, exclaimed in his harsh, dictatorial way:

"What on earth, Miss Ballentine, possessed you to do that? Don't you know that you spoiled your exit? I am really astonished that you should make such a bad break."

"Really, Mr. Wright, I couldn't help it!" the young lady pleaded. "A horrid, nasty bug lit on my neck and stung me in a really dreadful manner."

"You should not have yielded to the temptation to brush the thing away, in the presence of the audience," replied the autocrat of the stage department. "An actor or

actress should never forget their stage character, no matter what happens. The 'business' of your part did not call upon you to brush a bug from your neck, and you ought not to have done it.

"You should have suffered in silence until you left the stage and got out of the sight of the audience."

"Yes, I suppose I ought to have done so," the young woman responded; "but I acted on the spur of the moment and never really stopped to think about the matter."

"You must be sure to remember next time," was the stage-manager's parting injunction as he moved away.

"Yes, sir," replied the girl demurely, but as soon as the petty despot got out of the way she turned to her fellow-players who were standing in the wings and remarked:

"It was a really horrid bite and I think that if the old gentleman had a nasty bug take such a liberty with him he would have brushed it off fast enough no matter where he was, audience or no audience."

There was an assenting chorus from the listeners, most of whom were women.

"I declare, girls, if the dreadful thing hasn't made me feel quite sick, for I have an awful queer sensation in my head."

As it happened Miss Ballentine was not required on the stage until the next act, so she was assisted to her dressing room by her companions, but, after arriving there she rapidly grew worse and the stage-manager was sent for in haste.

He came bustling into the room.

The girls had constructed a sort of bed out of the chairs and Miss Ballentine was extended upon it in a state of almost total collapse.

"Bless my soul! This will not do at all!" the old stage-manager declared, after making a hasty examination of the suffering girl who was moaning in pain. "We must have a doctor! Here, somebody run around to the front of the house and see if the ushers can't spot some doctor in the audience."

Quite a little crowd of the stage-people had gathered by the door of the dressing-room, which the stage-manager had left open in his hasty entrance.

The news of anything of this kind spreads rapidly in a theater.

A couple of the working people of the theater ran for their coats to carry out the stage-manager's wishes.

In the group by the door were half a dozen of the supernumeraries, and one of these, a middle-aged man with a bushy, yellow beard, who looked like a German, immediately stepped forward.

"Oescuse me; sare," he said, with a strong foreign accent. "I am dot doctor dot you vant."

The stage-manager's face wore an incredulous expression.

It was his opinion that a doctor who was reduced to going on as a supernumerary in the Black Crook at twenty-five cents a night could not amount to much.

"It is any port in a storm though, I suppose," the old man thought, and then he said:

"Well, sir, if you are a doctor, I will be much obliged if you will see what you can do for this young lady."

"I will be glad to do dot for you, sure," the German responded in a grave and dignified way.

He advanced to the side of the moaning girl, the others respectfully making way for him.

The old stage-manager had a suspicious gaze fixed upon him, but the stranger proceeded with the calm composure of a man who knew what he was about.

He examined the girl's pulse, then gently moved her eyelids, which were partially closed, listened for a moment to her labored breathings, then inspected the tongue, the girl lying with half-opened mouth.

"My dear sare, I tink it is von case of poison," the German announced after he had completed his examination.

All within hearing were astonished.

"A case of poisoning!" the old stage-manager exclaimed, almost unable to believe that he had heard aright.

"Dot is v'at I said, sare," the German replied, with a polite bow. "All der symptoms are here, and it is von bad case too."

"Can we some hot water mit mustard make right away quick?" he inquired.

The bystanders looked helplessly at each other.

Hot water could be had in plenty, but mustard was a scarce article within the walls of a theater.

A messenger was dispatched in hot haste to procure some, and by the time he had returned a couple of doctors, who had been hunted up in the audience, came in a great hurry to attend to the suffering woman.

None of the spectators were inclined to believe that the bearded German amounted to much in the medical line.

The fact that he was going on as a "supe" led them to think that it was not possible that he could know much of the healing art.

To the surprise of all though the two doctors, after a hasty examination of the young woman came to exactly the same conclusion as the unknown German.

There was no disputing that these doctors knew what they were talking about, for they were two of the most eminent in the city.

All possible aid was rendered the girl, but in an hour from the time of the attack she was dead.

CHAPTER XX.

THE INQUEST.

THE sudden and mysterious death of the young actress created a great amount of talk.

There was an inquest, of course, and the coroner, assisted by the jackals of the press, did his level best to get at the truth of the matter.

Did the girl commit suicide? Was she tired of life, and eager to rush unbidden into another world?

Of course no one commits suicide without a motive, but, what motive had the girl?

The coroner and the detectives went on the old theory: disappointed love; but though the detectives and the able press gentlemen did their best, yet they could not discover that the girl had any love affair on hand, and when they got through their examination they were all prepared to declare that it was one of the most mysterious cases which had ever come under their knowledge.

The doctors of the city were also greatly interested in the case, for the medical men were puzzled to decide by what particular poison the girl had died.

One and all were satisfied that she had been poisoned, but none of them in all their experience had ever seen so strange a case.

The closest examination failed to detect any of the poisons so commonly used to end life's woes.

Arsenic, prussic acid, the deadly extracts of the poppy plant, and all the usual substances known to possess the power of sapping life's crimson stream, the doctors sought for without success.

And as far as they could determine, the girl had died from the action of a poison similar to the venom of a serpent.

So, after duly deliberating over the matter, these learned men gave it as their opinion that the girl had come to her death from the bite of a large fly which had been feeding on poisonous matter, and transfused some of it into the veins of the girl.

During the coroner's inquest, two men chanced to stand side by side, both paying particular attention to the evidence.

One of these was the bearded German who had claimed to be a medical man, and the other was Blondell, the Black Crook actor.

Although the German—who answered to the name of Everhardt Schmidt, by the way—had been the first man to examine the girl and report accurately upon the case, yet he had not been summoned to give his testimony.

The coroner was dazzled by the names of the eminent physicians who had been brought from the front of the house to attend the stricken woman, and believed that what they did not know about the matter was not worth knowing.

Blondell, of course, had not been summoned, for he knew nothing more about the affair than any of the rest of the bystanders who had gathered in eager curiosity in the neighborhood of the actress's dressing-room.

When the doctors began to flounder in

their testimony, admitting that they were entirely at sea in regard to the particular poison which had caused the death of Miss Ballentine, the German could not restrain his discontent, and was compelled to unbosom himself to the Black Crook.

The two had met in the theater, and therefore the German did not feel any hesitation in speaking to the young actor.

"Ach, himmell!" he cried in the ear of Blondell, "what kind of doctors are these der they are not capable of getting at der truth."

"Can they not see mit half an eye dot she did not die from der effect of a mineral poison?"

"Dot is to me as plain as der nose on man's face," he continued.

"Der poison dot der life of dot girl too come from der vegetable kingdom."

"You do not take any stock in this flimsy theory?" Blondell asked.

"Ach, himmell! no, I do not!" the German declared.

"It is all very well for dose mens wher dey strikes what you American mans calls a snag for to talk about flies and all dose nonsense, to conceal their own ignorance mark you, but dot young womans died from a vegetable poison. I will admit myself do I do not know what poison it is, for it is on dot is strange to me, and yet I thought knew about all der vegetable poisons."

"You have considerable knowledge on the subject then?" the Black Crook asked.

"Yes, yes!" the German replied. "There was a time when in my own land—in Germany—I was a student with one of der best authorities in Europe on the subject of poison."

Professor Valentine Von Graetz.

"Ah, my dear sir, what dot man did not know about poisons was not worth knowing."

"At the time when I entered his office he was a man of sixty-five, but as full of enthusiasm as der boy of twenty."

"Poisons were a hobby with him, and as I was one of his favorite pupils I soon grew to be as interested in der matter as der professor himself."

"Of course, I did not possess the vast fund of information which made der professor so great an authority upon der subject, but I knew far more than the average doctor ever learns."

"It was not strange, under the circumstances," the actor observed.

"Mine gootness, no! Ah, my dear sir, at that time I had as bright prospect as any man in der world," and the German shook his head in a melancholy way.

"The professor pronounced me to be one of his most brilliant students, and I was looking forward to taking a high rank in mine chosen profession. I was then shust two and-twenty."

"But, mine dear sir, there is an old saying, you know, man proposes and fate disposes."

"Yes, we are all more or less the creatures of circumstances."

"Dot vas right!" the German assented. "And der wise man who knows der world will not make any mistake about dot matter."

"Vell, my dear sir, shust as I vas on der threshold of my career I vas unfortunate enough to fall in love mit a charming girl."

"Mine passion vas returned, and we were engaged to be married, but as we both thought ourselves very prudent young people we agreed to postpone the ceremony until I had made a good start in life."

"That was certainly wise."

"Ah, yes; at dot time I prided mineself upon my wisdom," and the German heaved a deep sigh.

"Oh, v'at fools we mortals be! dot is v'at your great poet, the mighty Shakespeare sings, and truer words dan dose were never written."

"It is the custom in mine country for der young men, after they complete their studies, to spend some time in traveling before they settle down."

"I vas away from home one year. I corresponded regularly with my lady, and all went as merry as der marriage-bell until I returned, and then you can judge of mine astonishment when I found dot an officer in der army, a young sprig of nobility, vas paying attentions to my lady-love."

"He vas rich, mit a noble family, and mine lady mit her idea of securing a husband."

"It is the Black Crook," the German declared, "and how sensible he was to be influenced by mine."

"Yes, yes, mine lady and her faith mit me."

"Der officer der girl into a secret marriage, a false one, and der discovery vas made."

"The shust Into der water in der river."

"She paid der count, dere vas but I vas a married man, laughed at me satisfaction done der girl and kicked him of Berlin, he was of course he could not ment as that."

"We met days I could in Heidelberg the time dot I er of innocency back mit a swabian."

"It was a there was one der wou not attempt to der mans. I was der sentence of Yes; that look at the there was an Blondell observed I have be I am aware th der family of charge again conspirator a Vell, after was the same from German I became earth, and as joined the s drinker. That is der clothes and stage of the numerary; der receive is eno food, and I bed."

"A man l brace up, t marked. Now, it a chance to dis These doctor class men, ev case. It is n in regard to thing to be ular poison i tered."

"A little b Yes, and friends, I hav can't get at Black Crook A man li distance, and I will be glad I have n answered. After the Academy of anything to s

g that they we lady mit her peoples were dazzled by der idea of securing a count."

"It is the old story, and it is astonishing how sensible people will allow themselves to be influenced by a little money."

"Yes, yes, dot vas true, but dearly did mine lady and her family paid for breaking faith mit me."

"Der officer vas a rascal, he persuaded der girl into a secret marriage—dot marriage vas a false one, and after about three months der discovery vas made dot der count vas already a married man."

"The shock drove der girl to madness. Into der vater she jumped and found a grave in der river."

"She paid dearly for her error."

"Dot vas der truth. Now, I vas not a count, dere vas no noble blood in my veins, but I vas a mans, and although der count laughed at me when I told him dot he must me satisfaction give for der wrong dot he had done der girl, yet when I slapped his face and kicked him on one of der public streets of Berlin, he vas forced to meet me."

"Of course, as an officer and a gentleman he could not tamely submit to any such treatment as that," the young actor observed.

"We met on the field. In my college days I could handle der sword with any man in Heidelberg, and within five minutes from the time dot I crossed swords mit der betrayer of innocence I had him stretched upon his back mit a sword-thrust through der lungs."

"It was a righteous retribution, if ever there was one in this world!"

"The wound was a mortal one, and I will not attempt to deny dot I did my best to kill der mans."

"I vas der executioner who carried out der sentence of der law."

"Yes; that is certainly the proper way to look at the matter; but I don't doubt that there was an awful row kicked up about it," Blondell observed.

"I have been in Germany, and therefore I am aware that the officers of the army consider themselves to be a privileged class, and are very much inclined to look down upon all men who are not in the army as being decidedly inferior to them."

"You are right, my dear sir," the German observed. "After der death of der officer, his family would have moved heaven and earth to punish me for killing the mans; although no one could say that the duel was not conducted with the most perfect fairness."

"I vas wit'out any influential friends, and der family of der dead mans trumped up a charge against me dat I was a socialist—a conspirator against der emperor and der country."

"Vell, after what had happened, one place was the same as anodder to me, and so I fled from Germany."

"I became a wanderer on der face of der earth, and as I was reckless of what I did, I joined the socialists and became a hard drinker."

"That is why you see me mit shabby clothes and why I am glad to go on der stage of the Academy of Music as a supernumerary; der two dollars per week dot I receive is enough almost to provide me with food, and I have a friend who gives me a bed."

"A man like yourself ought to be able to brace up, though," the young actor remarked.

"Now, it seems to me, that you have a chance to distinguish yourself in this affair. These doctors, although they are all first-class men, evidently do not understand the case. It is my opinion that you are correct in regard to the poison, and now the next thing to be done is to find out what particular poison it was, and how it was administered."

"A little bit of detective work, eh?"

"Yes, and as the girl and I were good friends, I have made up my mind to see if I can't get at the heart of the mystery," the Black Crook declared.

"A man like yourself could be of vast assistance, and if you will lend me your aid I will be glad to secure it."

"I have no objection," the German answered.

"After the inquest is over we will go the Academy of Music, and see if we can find anything to shed any light on the mystery."

The verdict of the jury under such circumstances could not be a satisfactory one. All they could say was that the girl had come to her death by means of poison, but whether she had taken her own life, or been the victim of the malice of an enemy they could not say.

After the verdict was rendered the Black Crook and the German went to the Academy of Music, and made a careful examination of the stage in the vicinity of the first entrance where the girl had been standing when she complained of being bitten by a fly.

In the slight hollow, where the footlights are placed, they found a small bit of wood, which looked like the tip of a bamboo cane.

It was as sharp on the end almost as a needle, and discolored as though it had been dipped in paint.

"I think dot this is a most important discovery!" the German declared.

CHAPTER XXI.

ANOTHER TRAP.

HELENE MARZELLO sat in her parlor, on the morning of the day which succeeded the one on which the inquest had been held. Von Silbon was with her.

He had brought the morning newspapers, and had just finished reading the account of the inquest, which was detailed at length.

"This is the *Herald*," Von Silbon said, as he came to an end, and laid the newspaper upon his knee. "It gives the best account of the affair, and it is hardly worth while to read the description given by the others, for they do not differ materially."

"Do not trouble yourself," the *danseuse* replied. "I instructed you to bring three of the journals for I thought some one of them might contain some particulars of the sad affair which had escaped the others."

"No, they are all substantially the same."

"The death of the unfortunate girl is quite a shock to me," Helene remarked, in a reflective way.

"I did not like her, of course, and although she is dead I will not make any pretensions to the effect that there was any love lost between us for there was not; I looked upon her in the light of a rival, and a dangerous one, too, but a sudden death of this kind is always dreadful."

"No doubt about that," the German responded. "It was about as sudden a taking off as I ever heard of in all my experience."

"It is a very strange affair," he continued, thoughtfully.

"The doctors do not seem to know what to make of it, and they are all completely at sea."

"Oh, no, I don't think so!" Helene exclaimed, quickly. "That is not the way it appears to me. Do they not all agree that her death was due to the bite of some venomous insect which poisoned her blood?"

"That is the vague conjecture of one of them, and the others did not attempt to dispute it, for none of them have any facts to go on."

"But it seems to me that the supposition is a very reasonable one," the *danseuse* argued.

"Well, really, madame, I shall have to differ with you in regard to that," Silbon replied with a doubtful shake of the head.

"It appears to me that it is a very vague and unsubstantial conjecture."

"All that there is to it is that the girl was seen to brush something off her neck as she made her exit, and then after getting off the stage she complained that something had bitten her."

"Yes, but that is good proof!" the *danseuse* exclaimed.

"A court of law would not be apt to consider it so," Von Silbon responded.

"Now it is my opinion that this incident had but little to do with her death."

"As I said, the doctors were all at sea about the matter."

"It was not difficult for them to decide that the girl died from the effects of poison, for all the symptoms showed that, but with all their boasted knowledge they could not tell what the poison was, nor decide how it had been administered."

"Then some one of the wise men, gifted with a greater imagination than his fellows, thought of this trifling fly incident, and, straightway, got up this cock-and-bull story

about the girl having come to her death by the bite of a fly which had been feeding upon carrion."

"Ah, yes, but I have read of just such a thing!" the *danseuse* declared, quickly.

"This is a world given to lying, and we read of a great many things that are not so!" the German declared with the air of a philosopher.

"But I do not think there is any doubt about the matter!" Helene exclaimed.

"These accounts that I read were not mere newspaper fables but founded on facts."

"Besides if the story was not credible some one of the doctors would surely have disputed it."

"Ah, but it would be a breach of professional courtesy for one of the learned gentlemen to contradict another, particularly when no one of them had any certain grounds to go upon."

"It is just as I tell you, madame, the distinguished doctors were sadly perplexed; here was a case upon which they ought to be able to give an opinion without any trouble; they could not do so. To confess the truth would be to admit that they did not know as much as they pretended, and so they were glad to take refuge in this poisonous fly theory."

"Yes, it may be so," Helene remarked with an indifferent air as though the discussion wearied her.

"It doesn't matter to us, anyway. I am sorry that the girl is dead, because death is a dreadful thing, and after all, though I did feel in a spiteful mood toward her on account of Blondell, yet even if the girl had lived, I do not think that it would have troubled me much to have got the Black Crook away from her, for a doll-faced beauty of that kind could not hope to rival a woman like myself."

"Certainly not! the very thought is absurd!" Von Silbon declared.

"Now then, there is a little work for you to do," the *danseuse* remarked, abruptly.

"Command me!"

"What has become of Dunbarton? I have not seen him for a week or so."

"He has been off on a shooting trip to the northern part of the State with some other chappies who aspire to set up as sportsmen."

"I saw him the night before he started, and he confided to me that your indifference to his suit had about driven him to despair, and he remarked that he really believed he would do something desperate if you did not smile upon his suit."

"When will he return?"

"He has come back—arrived this morning, Von Silbon explained.

"I saw one of the party, but as the most of them were decidedly under the weather—the trip, you understand, was merely one long continuous spree—the majority of the gentlemen are not likely to make their appearance until about time for dinner."

"Yes, I comprehend."

Then the *danseuse* appeared to be buried in reflection for a few moments, while Von Silbon watched her with a curious look in his eyes.

"You must find Dunbarton, and bring him here to dinner with me; get him here by five this afternoon, if possible."

"I can do that easily enough; there will not be any trouble about the matter," Von Silbon replied confidently.

"All I will have to do is to say to him 'the divine Helene awaits you,' and there is no temptation in this world strong enough to keep him away."

"That is the truth; the boy is completely infatuated with me, and I can twist him around my finger without any trouble," Helene remarked in a thoughtful way.

"I will have him here all right."

"And on the way get him to drink a little; don't allow him to get drunk, you comprehend."

"I understand," Von Silbon replied.

"You want me to get enough liquor into him to make the lad feel jolly and reckless."

"That is the idea exactly."

"I can arrange the matter without any trouble," the German declared.

"And I have another commission. Go to some minister's and make arrangements for a marriage ceremony, to be performed at his house at six o'clock this evening; some thoroughly respectable man, you understand,

about whose character there cannot be any question, for the ceremony must be one that will hold, no matter how strongly any one may try to break it."

"I will attend to the matter."

"I shall not attempt to keep you in the dark in regard to the game I am going to play."

"It is your intention to marry Dunbarton, I presume?"

"It is."

"Well, I don't think there will be any trouble in arranging the matter, unless there has been a very decided change in his opinion in regard to you."

"I am not at all afraid of that!" the *dansuse* exclaimed, with a scornful smile.

"As I told you, I can twist the boy completely around my finger."

"Oh, yes, he is your most obedient slave."

"Any other command?"

"None."

"I will attend to the matter at once then."

The German took his departure.

As he descended to the street he meditated long and earnestly.

"What is in the wind?" he murmured at last.

"The game is so deep that even I with all my knowledge of this tricky and unscrupulous woman—coupled with an experience gained in a life of adventure, cannot fathom it."

"But I can make a guess in regard to the matter," he continued after a moment's pause. "The death of the girl is the keynote to the whole."

"She was murdered!"

"There is no doubt about it in my mind, but the work was so skillfully performed that I cannot for the life of me see how it was done."

"I suspect that Luddingford is concerned in the matter. He is a wily scoundrel, and wished to interest the madame in some deep game."

"The death of the girl was the first move in the plot, but about that death there are two things which puzzle me."

"The madame believes that the Black Crook is in love with the girl; but would she go to the length of killing the actress merely for the purpose of removing her from the path?"

Von Silbon shook his head. It did not seem possible to him that she would play so desperate a game to accomplish so small a result.

"And this sudden resolve on her part to marry Dunbarton. What does she expect to gain by that move?"

The German shook his head.

"I am utterly in the dark," he reflected.

"She could have married the man at any time during the past six months. There would not have been any trouble about the matter."

"Why then this haste? Why does she wish the man to be flushed with drink, so as to make assurance doubly sure in regard to the marriage? I must keep careful watch for I may be able to make something out of the affair," Von Silbon muttered.

CHAPTER XXII.

A DISCOVERY.

This little bit of wood, which was apparently the tip of a bamboo cane, did not seem to be much of a find, yet both the young actor and the German doctor got the idea that it might turn out to be of considerable importance.

After leaving the Academy of Music, they walked slowly down the street and discussed the matter.

"The girl complained of being bitten by a fly," Blondell observed.

"The point of this bit of wood is almost as sharp as a needle. Now, suppose that it was used as an arrow; if the dart struck the girl in the neck it would, undoubtedly, feel just the same to her as the sting of some flying insect."

"Yes, dot vas true," the doctor assented. "It vos a fact, too, dot there are some wild tribes of savages who use such weapons."

"Oh, yes; there isn't any mistake about that, for I have often read accounts given by travelers, who described the way in which these wild men made war," the Black Crook observed in a thoughtful way.

"I know of my own personal knowledge dot der stories are true," Schmidt remarked.

"As I told you, for the last ten years I have led a sort of a vagabond life and have wandered in many strange foreign countries; for three years I was in der southern seas, on a German trading ship, and so had an opportunity to see how the South Sea Islanders make war."

"It is a most mysterious case," Blondell observed. "And the first thing for us to do is to have an examination made of this bit of wood for the purpose of ascertaining whether the point is poisoned or not."

"Yes, mine friend, you are right; dot is der first thing to be done, but it will cost money," the German warned.

"We will have to go to a chemist, you know, a man who makes a business of such t'ings."

"The question of money need not stand in the way," the Black Crook declared. "I have become interested in the matter, and shall not hesitate to put out considerable cash for the sake of getting at the heart of the mystery."

"I liked the girl, too, and so I have a little personal feeling about the matter," Blondell continued.

"Since the discovery of this bit of wood I have come to the conclusion that she has been foully murdered, and I intend to devote both time and money in an attempt to bring the doer of the awful crime to justice."

"Dot vos right," Schmidt assented. "It vos my opinion dot der girl vos murdered, but I fear dot it will be a difficult matter to bring der crime home to the doer of der deed."

"At all events I can make a good try for it!" Blondell declared. "And, as I said, I am willing to spend considerable money in the investigation."

"Now, then, first we will have this bit of wood examined, and would it not be a good idea to call upon Doctor Alexander Valentine? He is the portly gentleman to whose evidence the coroner paid so much attention."

"Yes, he is an able mans," the German remarked. "I could see by the way dot he spoke at der inquest. He did not know what to make of der matter, and he was not afraid to come out and say so."

"He is one of the leading doctors of New York, a man with a great reputation for skill and sagacity and if we can succeed in interesting him in the matter it is certain that his advice would be valuable to us."

"Yes, yes, no doubt."

"We will call upon him immediately."

The pair were lucky enough to find the doctor at home and at liberty.

The physician recognized the Black Crook at once, as he was a great theater-goer, and when the situation was explained to him, expressed his willingness to do all in his power to aid in getting at the truth.

"In fact, I take a great interest in the matter for it is a very peculiar case," he remarked.

"The study of poisons is a sort of a hobby of mine, although a busy man like myself does not have much time to devote to hobbies, and the fact that I was not able to detect by what particular poison the unfortunate girl came to her death amazed me."

"Of course, I did not really have time enough to make a good examination."

Schmidt then explained at length the conclusion to which he and the young actor had come.

The doctor listened attentively, and when the relation was concluded expressed his belief that the chances were great they were correct in their surmise.

"I will have the analysis made at once, and I assure you that I will take all possible care to have it as complete as possible."

The companions thanked the doctor for his promised aid and withdrew.

They proceeded down Fifth avenue until they came to Fourteenth street, and as they crossed that thoroughfare Blondell was hailed by Johnny Roach, the manager of the troupe of Royal Australian Bushmen.

The manager was puffing and blowing as though he had come along in great haste.

"Hey, Blondell, can you tell me where I can find a doctor?" he exclaimed. One of those infernal bushmen of mine has managed to get hold of a lot of whisky, and I am

afraid that he is going to have an, I have the jim-jams."

"My friend, here, is a doctor," he is a sh replied, and then he introduced the lared.

"I have had a good deal of expad more s such cases," Schmidt remarked, "I, me go i not doubt but what I will be able to bourne."

"Come right along, then, for"

sake!" the fat Englishman exclaimed me car

the fellow is beginning to get wild, fellow afraid he will go in to smash things, manage

"If he does cut up ugly, you k-hour late people will be sure to take alarm, h clip will probably send for the police, re paid will be the deuce to pay!"

"I will get a mixture in this dbeats the which will be almost certain to quid" the m

the German remarked.

"Do so, by all means," the manag

Then the three entered the drug-st

the German wrote a prescription, wh

put up, and then the two proceeded

boarding-house where the troupe wei

ciled.

The manager led the way to the fine llek

the hilarious bushman, who was mld not

than the old rascal, Hala Hula, wh she in

quaintance our readers made in adly puzz

chapter of our tale.

"It is a most astonishing thing hstruction

man contrived to get at any liquor," tff his abi

ager remarked as he led the way had no c

stairs. "I am compelled to allow theshman,

a regular amount of grog every wabarton

there wouldn't be any getting along, with a

them if I did not; but I am careful were lig

them from going on regular spret a vac

where this duffer got the money to hd with

liquor with is a mystery to me."

Hala Hula was in a particularly in-chop

mood when the three entered the room

His liquor was exhausted and here was

panions, who were loyal to the Engliand it

had refused to allow him to call the magn

all work, whom the savage had bribeshould

getting him the whisky, so that he coia fello

more liquor.

Hala Hula was a quarrelsome fellowad hu

ticularly when he had been drinking, necessa

there had only been a couple of men o;

to him he would undoubtedly have was abo

fight; but even though he was drunk found

sense enough to know that he could nos of on

the whole troupe.

The wild fit though which had see own

manager out in hot haste in search of a ding tr

had passed away, and the old bushmans to th

what he was about even if he was soainbart

liquor.

"He all right now," said the big war. knev

the principal man of the tribe, who s with

Hala Hula became violent had coolly ately.

him by the throat, thrown the old rase Eng

the floor, and sat on him until he blding

peaceable.

"You miserable, black rascal!" excldy th

the burly Englishman in hot indigrained

"What do you mean by acting in thi on t

rageous manner?"

"Me tired—me homesick—Hala Hula!" How

to go back to the big island again!" thShe is

bushman replied.

"Well, as far as that is concerned, mI say,

knows I would be glad to get rid of you, me

manager responded.

"But I don't exactly see my way cl My c

pay your passage home until you coming t

your contract with me, for the specuared.

has not paid me enough profit to enab You

to do anything of the kind," Roachld wh

tinued.

"Huh! me pay my own way!" thI can

bushman exclaimed with a great de he I

dignity and as he spoke he fished out ds t

secret pocket in his breast a roll of bills wat ga

he flourished triumphantly in the face o heu

astonished manager.

"Goodness gracious! Wherever did he wi

get that money?" Johnny Roach exclai You

utterly amazed.

"Me have it long time!" the old fello Oh,

plied. "Me save all the money me get, ice

me go home!"

The Englishman shook his head, d I h

fully. This tale was more than he was put

ing to swallow.

"Well, of course, it is no business of arg c

how you got the money," the manag ne.

marked.

"And if you want to quit the show, ttruth

ng to have an, I have no objections to offer. You is soon as you like.

, is a doctor, "re is a ship to-morrow," the bush-introduced the lared.

is there?" the Englishman exclaimed, d deal of expd more surprised.

it remarked, "i, me go in that, the Sea Lion, she go will be able to bourne."

right! you can get out as soon as you ng, then, for,

shman exclaim me carriage—me go right away," ng to get wild, fellow exclaimed.

smash things, manager complied with the request, p ugly, you k hour later Hala Hula was on board of

take alarm, h clipper ship, Sea Lion, with his the police, he paid to the city of Melbourne,

ay!"

ure in this beats the devil as to how he got the certain to quid!" the manager declared.

as," the manag red the drug-st

escription, wh two proceeded

the troupe wer SILBON lost no time in carrying out

structions which he had received from way to the fine Helene.

, who was did not understand just what kind of ala Hula, wh she intended to play, and was con-

s made in ably puzzled over the matter, but this d not prevent him from carrying out

thing thing hstructions which he had received to the ny liquor," ff his ability.

led the way had no difficulty in finding the young d to allow the shman, Talbot Dunbarton.

rog every wabarton was a slender, sallow-faced getting alon, with a dull, expressionless face; his

am careful were light blue in color, and always regular spret a vacant look; his upper lip was

he money to hd with a scanty mustache, and some to me." gling side-whiskers, in the English

particularly chop style, came down from his ered the room

sted and here wasn't anything attractive about the to the English and it was not surprising that such a

to call the magnificent woman as Helene Mar- go had bribed should hesitate to become the wife of

so that he coin fellow.

ore seeking the Englishman, Von Sil- elsome fellow had hunted up a minister and made

a drinking, necessary arrangements for the wed- ple of men o;

tedly have was about twelve o'clock when the Ger- was drunk found Dunbarton in the bachelor apart-

t he could nos of one of the wildest young bloods in ity.

ich had see owner of the rooms was off on a search of a ding trip, and had turned over the apart-

old bushmans to the Englishman.

he was so in barton was just getting up when Von n arrived, and as the Englishman's

the big war. knew the German was on intimate tribe, who s with his master, he admitted him im-

had coolly ately.

the old raste Englishman expressed his delight upon until he blding his visitor, and at once ordered

dy and soda.

uscal!" excldy throat is as dry as an ash-heap," he hot indignained.

"You see, we had a deuce of a ting in th on this trip, and I have come back to

"York almost completely used up.

-Hala Hula "How is the divine Marzello?" again!" th She is in the best of health," Von Silbon

ied.

ncerned, bl say, old fellow, you ought to be able to rid of you me a little with her," the young Eng-

man remarked in a pleading way.

ny way el My dear boy, I assure you that I am you coming to do all I can for you," Von Silbon

the specuared.

t to enab You are one of the few men in this ,," Roach d whom I am proud to number among my

nds, and you can depend upon my doing way!" th d can for you."

great de he Englishman expressed in suitable fished out ds the gratification which this announce-

l of bills wot gave him.

the face o hen the German explained that he had naged to secure an invitation for him to

rever did e with the danseuse.

ch exclaim "You don't mean it, old fellow!" Dunbar-

exclaimed, highly delighted.

old fellow "Oh, yes," Silbon replied. "You see,

y me get, ee the time when I told you that u could depend upon my friendly

head, de I have never neglected an opportunity

a he was out in a good word for you, going on the

nciple, you know, that the constant drip-

siness of erg of water will wear away the hardest

manage ne."

ac Yes, yes, of course; and there is a deal

ue show, t truth in it, too!"

"The madame is a self-willed woman, you understand, one who is not easy to manage, and if she got the impression that I was endeavoring to get her to look with a favorable eye upon your suit, the chances are that my intercession would do you more hurt than good."

"Oh, yes; I comprehend that the matter is one that must be handled very carefully," the Englishman remarked with a wise shake of the head.

"Women are changeable creatures, you know, and apt to act upon the impulse of the moment," Silbon observed.

"Now, at the present time the madame seems to be remarkably well disposed toward you, and it is my impression that if you pressed your wooing in a vigorous manner there might be a chance for you."

"Egad! do you really think so?" Dunbarton exclaimed.

"I have come to that opinion," the German replied.

"Of course, it is possible that I have made a mistake about the matter, but it will not do any harm for you to press your suit as ardently as possible."

"I will do it! You can depend upon that!" Dunbarton declared.

Then Von Silbon invited the young Englishman to go to lunch with him, and after the pair had satisfied the cravings of their appetites they got a carriage, took a drive through Central Park and then out into the open country beyond the Harlem River, the favorite pleasure drive of the denizens of the metropolis.

The pair did not neglect to stop at about all of the numerous road-houses on the way, for the purpose of partaking of liquid refreshments.

So when Von Silbon escorted Dunbarton into the parlor of Helene Marzello, he felt decidedly jolly.

The *danseuse* received him so cordially that the Englishman was at once transported to the seventh heaven of delight, as the saying is.

Helene had ordered a most delicious repast, but was careful to provide only light wines, for it was a part of her game not to allow the young Englishman to become intoxicated.

She wished him to be slightly under the influence of liquor, so that he would be ready to agree to the suggestion which it had been arranged Von Silbon should make, but that was all.

Encouraged by the liquor which he had drunk, Dunbarton made violent love to the *danseuse*, from the beginning to the end of the dinner, and Helene, while affecting to be extremely shy, really encouraged him.

Then, when Von Silbon judged that a favorable moment had arrived, in a joking way he suggested that, as the madame and the young Englishman would evidently make a splendid couple, it would be a good idea for them to get married.

"I know a minister, who lives close at hand, who will be glad to tie the knot," he added.

"We can get a carriage and drive right to his house, there is no marriage license needed in this State, and in twenty or thirty minutes you can be man and wife."

"By Jove! that will be as jolly a lark as I ever heard of in all my life!" Dunbarton declared, delighted with the idea.

"And, my dear Helene, if you will only consent I assure you that all the rest of my life shall be devoted to making you happy!"

For a few moments the *danseuse* pretended to be coy, said that it would be so sudden, and asked what would the world think when it heard the news.

"Hang the world!" Dunbarton cried. "Once you are my wife you can afford to laugh at the opinion of the world."

"In a very few months now I will have fifty thousand dollars, and you can depend upon our having the jolliest kind of a time while the fifty thousand lasts, and when it is gone there is a good chance that some other windfall will come my way."

Von Silbon at this point came to the young man's assistance, and in a few well-chosen words expressed his opinion that such a marriage would really be a capital thing.

"Just think what a splendid advertisement it will be for you, madame!" he said in conclusion. "Why, the newspapers will be

sure to give a column account of the affair as soon as the reporters get the news."

"Yes, by Jove!" Dunbarton exclaimed. "It will be a seven-days' wonder."

Then the *danseuse* pretended to yield to a sudden impulse.

"I will do it!" she exclaimed. "It will be a jolly lark, and I dearly love to make people stare."

"Run for a coach, Von Silbon, please, and we will be off at once!"

The German hastened to comply with the request.

The carriage had already been ordered, and was standing at the door, so it did not take Von Silbon long to arrange the matter.

In less than fifteen minutes from the time the suggestion was made the three were in the coach and on the way to the minister's house.

When the carriage arrived at its destination, Von Silbon requested the others to remain in the coach while he made the necessary arrangements with the reverend gentleman.

Of course as the reverend gentleman had been duly warned it did not take the German long to arrange matters.

The three entered the house.

The minister's son and nephew acted as witnesses, and Talbot Dunbarton of London, England, was married to Helene Marzello, the *premiere danseuse* of the Black Crook.

In his delight at securing the woman, whose charms had made so deep an impression upon him, Dunbarton had given Von Silbon a fifty-dollar bill to present to the minister, who was decidedly astonished at the largeness of the fee.

As soon as the marriage ceremony was completed the three departed.

As it was a little after seven o'clock, by this time the carriage proceeded directly to the theater.

The *danseuse* went at once to her dressing-room to prepare for her night's work.

Dunbarton and Silbon first visited one of the saloons in the neighborhood where they drank success to each other, and then the young Englishman bought a box in the theater so that he might enjoy the exquisite dancing of the beautiful woman whom he had succeeded in winning for his wife.

Flushed by his success Dunbarton wanted to celebrate his triumph by drinking, and Von Silbon had a great deal of trouble in keeping him from making a beast of himself, for the *danseuse* did not wish the impression to get abroad that Dunbarton was under the influence of liquor when the marriage took place.

The play came to an end as usual and the Englishman, proud and happy, escorted his new-made wife to her hotel.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNEXPECTED EVENT.

It was the game of Helene Marzello to give as wide publicity as possible to the fact that she had been married to Talbot Dunbarton, the last descendant of the Dunbartons of Clitheroe, the old English family, so Von Silbon had been instructed by her to give all the newspaper men a full account of the hasty wedding.

Of course, news of this kind is always welcome to the untiring newspaper-reporter, and the press gentlemen did their best to make a good story out of the item.

After describing how the wealthy young Englishman had followed the queen of the ballet across the sea, and how in the New World she had yielded to the influence of the tender passion, they gave a history of both bride and groom, for it was something a little out of the common run for the sole descendant of one of the best families in England to marry a woman who gained her living by dancing upon the stage.

Helene had invited Von Silbon to breakfast with her, and charged him to be particular to bring all the newspapers which contained an account of the wedding.

Von Silbon arrived at ten o'clock, and found the newly-wedded pair just ready to sit down to the table.

The German joined them, and, as they sipped their coffee, Von Silbon read the newspaper accounts, and the three laughed heartily at the romances which some of the imaginative reporters had seen fit to tell.

Dunbarton was very jolly, and in his gay-

ety insisted upon having some brandy and soda, and he partook so liberally of this beverage, so dear to the average English man's heart, that in quite a short space of time he got so decidedly under the influence of the liquor that Von Silbon was obliged to assist him into the bedroom and place him on the bed.

In five minutes Dunbarton was fast asleep.

The *danseuse* had not troubled her head about the man to whom she had been so recently wedded, but read a newspaper while the German attended to the young Englishman.

Von Silbon took the precaution to close the door of the bedroom tightly behind him when he came out.

"The joy of married life has been too much for the young man, and he is obliged to fly to brandy and soda," the German remarked with a sarcastic smile as he resumed his seat.

"The fellow is a shallow-pated donkey!" Helene returned.

"I never supposed that he had much sense, but he has even less than I believed," she continued.

"I was told that he had been drinking very heavily lately, but I never thought that he would have so little moral courage as to be unable to resist getting drunk on the very morning after his marriage, and in your presence, too," Von Silbon remarked.

"I am not at all astonished, for during the past month I have been watching the man, and I had a suspicion that he had got to that stage when he would not be able to let liquor alone, no matter where he was or in whose company."

"Well, is this sort of thing going to be agreeable to you—are you going to put up with a drunken fool of this kind?"

"Oh, no, not for long, you can depend upon that!" the *danseuse* answered, in her prompt, decided manner.

"It will be very easy to supply him with plenty of money so he can gorge himself with all the brandy he likes, and if he doesn't drink himself to death in a month or so I shall be surprised."

"Well, he is not strong, and he has been going at such a rapid pace lately that it would not be surprising, if he keeps it up, for him to break down," Von Silbon remarked, reflectively.

"He is nothing but a mere wreck now, and as he is a perfect fool he will not have sense enough to stop!" Helene exclaimed, in a tone full of contempt.

"If the man dies, you will be saved the trouble of getting rid of him, for, of course, you did not marry him with the idea of putting up with any nonsense of this kind," Von Silbon observed.

"Oh, no, I am not the kind of woman to carry around a drunken husband."

"I shall have to put up with him for a few days, just for appearances' sake, and then my gentleman will have to find some other quarters."

"You will get a slice of the fifty thousand, anyway, and the game is certainly worth some little trouble."

"I am playing for a far greater stake than a share of the fifty thousand," the *danseuse* replied.

"Ah, I comprehend; this marriage is a move in the game which Luddingford wanted you to play."

"Yes, and the stake is an enormous one."

"Do you think there is a good chance for you to win?"

"It certainly looks so now, but it is too soon yet to be able to tell anything definitely."

"If you need my aid, of course, you can count upon it," the German remarked.

"Oh, yes, I am aware of that. I know that you are a most faithful friend, and in this case the stake is so large that we will all be able to get a fortune out of it."

"That is good!" exclaimed Von Silbon, rubbing his hands in glee.

"I am tired of the stage, and if I have money enough it will be an easy matter for me to go to some of those little German duchies and buy a title, then I can flourish as the countess of this, or the duchess of that. If I have plenty of money to keep up my rank I will be treated by the world at large with as

fully as much respect as though I was born to the station."

"Oh, yes, there isn't any doubt about that. It is the money, and not the title, which commands the respect of the world."

"I have seen that demonstrated a hundred times!" the *danseuse* declared.

"By the way, I could suggest a short cut to the charmed circle of nobility," Von Silbon observed.

"Explain!"

"Marriage."

"After I get rid of this fool marry some man of noble rank, eh?"

"Exactly! Europe, you know, is full of sprigs of nobility, very rich in titles, and very poor in pocket."

"I am aware of that fact, but I do not care to sell myself even for the sake of getting into the ranks of the nobility; besides after I get rid of this idiot I shall be in a position to marry to please myself, and I have already selected my husband."

"I shall not make any secret about the matter to you," the *danseuse* continued.

"The husband upon whom I have set my heart is this actor, Blondell."

Von Silbon shook his head.

A scornful smile appeared on the face of the queen of the ballet.

"You don't think that I can get him?" she asked.

"It certainly does look a little doubtful to me," the German admitted.

"Because he once expressed the opinion that he did not care for me!"

"Yes, and I think he meant what he said," Von Silbon replied.

"Men are changeable creatures. Just as changeable as women, although they do not bear that reputation."

"At the time that you spoke to him he had taken a fancy to this unfortunate English girl, who came to her death in so strange a manner, and he is one of the peculiar men whose heart is not large enough to allow of the existence of two passions at the same time."

"He fancied the girl, and so did not care for me. But the English beauty has passed from off the stage of life and I need no longer dread her as a rival."

"Yes, that is the truth," the German admitted, and as he looked upon the woman who was so splendid in her beauty, the thought came to him:

"Can it be possible that you had a hand in her death?"

"The death of the English girl leaves a niche vacant in his heart—why should I not fill it?" the *danseuse* asked.

"I am not ashamed to confess to you—to him—to all the world, that I love him, and now that he is heart-free why should I not try for him?"

"There is no earthly reason why you should not," Von Silbon replied.

"I think the chances are good," she remarked. "I am a woman of indomitable will, and when I once set my mind upon accomplishing a certain thing I never allow myself to be discouraged no matter how many obstacles there may be in the path."

"I want the man and I am going to have him if it takes me all the rest of my life to accomplish the feat!"

At this point the conversation was interrupted by some strange sounds which seemed to come from the bedroom.

"What is that?" cried the *danseuse* in alarm.

"It must be Dunbarton—he is ill!" Von Silbon declared.

The pair rushed to the door.

When it was opened the young Englishman was discovered upon the floor apparently in a fit.

"A doctor, quick!" cried Helene, running to the bell, while Von Silbon hastened to the side of the groaning man.

Assistance was speedily procured.

It was too late.

In ten minutes from the time that the pair discovered the stricken man writhing upon the floor of the bedroom, the young Englishman was dead.

The last scion of the old British family, the Dunbartons of Clitheroe, had gone to his final rest.

The doctor's examination revealed the fact that to the life of dissipation which the young man had led his death was due.

Again Helene, the dangerous sire, my impression that free woman. Blondell declared!

Fortune seemed to smile upon her, she would not commit motive for her to do a

CHAPTER XXV.

SEEKING AID.

THE death of the young Englishman, so soon after his marriage to the *danseuse*, created a deal of talk.

Helene retired immediately from the stage, and put on the deepest kind of mourning. Black Crook then played the part of the disconsolate wife in perfection.

Two weeks rapidly passed away. The chief, and he shook his

During that time the analysis of the stance on the end of the bit of wood, my word, Mr. the actor and the German had found out that the stage of the Academy of Music had completed, and the chemist made his report.

It is my opinion. In that the end of the bit of wood had dipped in a deadly poison extract, and some members of the vegetable kingdom the process known and practiced by the

Then, when the young actor made a random upon it with to the old doctor his suspicions about matter, the physician was amazed.

"It sounds like a page out of a romance of the Middle Ages!" he exclaimed.

"That is correct, yet I believe that the girl put her hit upon the truth," Blondell replied.

"It really seems to be incredible!" the doctor exclaimed.

"Your theory of the case is that by a dart must have of some peculiar weapon the woman was wounded in the neck by this poisoned in a meditative way and that wound brought about her death is no doubt about

"Yes, there is not a doubt in my mind that she came to her death in that way from the private box," Black Crook responded.

"She certainly did die from the effects of the poison, and it is entirely within the probability that the poison was administered in that way," the physician remarked reflectively.

"And it follows then that the girl was foully murdered," the doctor declared.

"That is what I think!" Blondell declared to the audience, and "It is a case for the detectives then," he said.

"Yes, most certainly," the doctor assented.

"It really is a most mysterious affair," the old doctor remarked, greatly puzzled.

"A young girl like this one ought to have had any enemies sufficiently bitter to strike at her life."

"It does appear to be almost incredible, but the fact remains that the girl is the back of the book and was stricken down by some unknown foe."

"Yes, yes, there is no disputing that," the doctor said.

"There is a deep, dark mystery connected with the affair and, as I said in the beginning, it is a case for the detectives."

"You are right and I will see the superintendent of police immediately," the actor declared.

"I certainly would if I were you," the doctor assented.

"And you can tell the superintendent that there isn't any doubt in my mind about the girl dying from the effects of some poison, distilled from the vegetable kingdom, who did the job and there is a strong probability that the son was introduced into her system by a

of a needle-pointed dart. I do not take any part in the disappearance of either but the fact remains that the girl is the back of the book and was stricken down by some unknown foe."

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"You are right and I will see the superintendent of police immediately," the actor declared.

"I certainly would if I were you," the doctor assented.

dangerous sire my impression that she was murdered. Blondell declared: "For I feel sure she would not commit suicide; there is no motive for her to do anything of the kind."

FER XXV.

ING AID. hardly within the bounds of possibility for her to have got hold of such a poison which caused her death, by mistake, while she was discovered some facts which point to murder.

Black Crook then related to the inspector the particulars concerning the bit of wood which had appeared on the face of the victim.

Chief, and he shook his head in a serious analysis of the case.

the bit of wood in my word, Mr. Blondell, this man had found it as if there had been foul play of some kind.

hemist made his opinion. In fact, I have not a bit of wood in regard to the matter."

poison extracted from the dart must have been discharged into the private box on the right-hand side of the stage," the inspector remarked, drawing a blank-paper pad to him and making a memorandum upon it with his pencil as he spoke.

suspicious about the case. It happened, I was in the box on the very night of the murder.

exclaimed. "This affair happened, and I remember that I believe that the girl put her hand up to her face."

Blondell replied. "She made her exit." "That was when she brushed away which she supposed had bitten her."

case is that by the dart must have been discharged upon the woman's front of the house," the inspector said.

at about her death is no doubt about that," the young man declared. "And it could only have been in that way from the private box."

it is likely," the police chief assented. "I don't know much about this style of murder, but I remember to have read of poison being added to the drink, but the physician remarks that the attack must be made at the moment when the victim is in the box, so as to be out of the audience, and by keeping him from the notice of the actors."

to avoid the notice of the actors." "The best of my recollection there were no persons in that particular box on the night of the tragedy," Blondell remarked thoughtfully.

did not take any particular notice of the almost disappearance of either of them, for they were in the back of the box, but there isn't anything strange about that, for a great many people who occupy boxes at the theater prefer not to sit forward so as to attract attention."

mystery comes, I am aware of that." "I said in the beginning that the attack was made in this manner, and in a mysterious manner, no one had seen the suspicion of the truth," the Black Crook declared.

diately," the Black Crook declared. "One of the first things to be done is to find out who occupied that particular box on the night of the murder, and that ought not to be a difficult thing to do, although there is no doubt that if our surmises are correct, the persons who did the job will have taken care to cover up their tracks as much as possible."

doubt about that," the actor asserted. "My idea is that the death of the girl is not the result of a carefully-planned conspiracy, but of a mistake."

I am not mistaken it is certain that the actors will take all possible care in their movements."

will put some of my best men on the case," the inspector declared. "The men had to hire the box, of course. I wished to prevent any one from tracking them, they would not come themselves but through one of the theater-tickets, or by the aid of a messenger-boy," the police chief continued.

Black Crook replied. "Our performance pleased to do it with one or both of the men," the Black Crook argued.

rence Ballantyne had to pay the money for the box, and if we can only succeed in getting the man who received the money we will be able to get a clue to the identity of the person."

she took the case as correct, and I will have my department do their best to get at the parties," the inspector remarked.

a mystery." "And now we come to the main idea—"

what was the motive for this crime?" the police chief asked in his shrewd way.

"Such a deed as this is not committed without a powerful reason, and as far as I can see there does not appear to be any."

"The inquest did not throw any light upon the subject, the girl did not appear to have any enemies—was not even entangled in any love affair."

"Yes, that is true; on the surface there does not appear to be any reason for the murder of the unfortunate young woman," Blondell remarked.

"But there are certain things known to me which will, I think, throw some light on the subject."

The Black Crook had not forgotten the warning which had been given him by the French waiting-maid in the old tenement-house, and although at the time he was disposed to think that, woman-like, the girl was inclined to exaggerate the matter, yet now after the dreadful tragedy of the girl's death, he had reluctantly begun to believe that she had not made any mistake.

The young actor had resolved to tell the inspector all the particulars of the affair from the beginning to the end, only suppressing the name of the person who had taken the trouble to warn him.

The official was considerably surprised by the disclosure.

"This is a terrible accusation to make against a woman," the inspector said when Blondell finished his recital.

"I would be delighted to find that it is not true, but I fear I will not be gratified," Blondell replied.

"Some women are perfect devils when their passions are aroused," the inspector remarked. "And this beautiful creature may be one of that kind. As far as I have heard she has a rather peculiar past life, and, whether she be innocent or guilty, it will not do any harm to examine into the matter; but the investigation must be conducted very quietly or she will be sure to take the alarm."

"The first point though is to get at the men in the box, and I think it would be a good idea for you to accompany the detective."

Blondell expressed his willingness to render all the aid in his power.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SLEUTH AT WORK.

THE inspector touched his bell, and, when his messenger entered, inquired for Detective Michael Hennessy.

As it happened, the detective was in the building, and the chief requested the messenger to summon him.

"You will find this gentleman to be a first-class man, Mr. Blondell," the inspector remarked as the messenger departed on his errand.

"In fact, I don't know a man in the detective line who can put in better work in a case of this kind than Mike Hennessy, for he has a soft, insinuating way with him, and hardly one person out of a thousand would ever take him to be a man-hunter."

When Detective Mike Hennessy appeared, the Black Crook saw at a glance that the man fully bore out the chief's recommendation.

The veteran thief-taker was a man of forty-five, or thereabouts, a portly, jolly-looking fellow, with a smooth, round face, who appeared more like a prosperous-looking butcher than anything else.

"I will give this case in Mr. Hennessy's charge for the present," the inspector said. "And if he thinks that it needs more than one man to handle it, I will put more on."

"It will be necessary, of course, for Mr. Hennessy to understand just what we think about the affair in order for him to do good work," the inspector added.

The actor bowed assent. The police chief then fully explained all the particulars about the case.

"It is a big game, and a deep one," the detective remarked. "And if we can succeed in entrapping the birds, it will be a big feather in our caps."

"We will make a good try for it, anyway, so do your best," Inspector Byrnes enjoined.

The actor and the detective departed.

"Are you acquainted with the people in the box-office of the Academy, and on good terms with them?" the detective asked after he and Blondell reached the street.

"Oh, yes; all of them are quite friendly."

"That is good, for it will help us along a little. As it happens, none of the people about the house know me, so that if we manage the game the proper way they will not have any suspicion that I am a detective, and that will help us along amazingly."

"We must give 'em a ghost story, you know, for it is important that it should not get out that a detective has taken hold of the case."

"Yes, I comprehend. It might come to the knowledge of the parties whom we are trying to track, and it would be sure to put them on their guard."

"Exactly! that is the idea to a hair! Now then, we will give them this little cock-and-bull story:

"I am an old friend of yours. I was in the auditorium of the Academy of Music on a particular night, and in a box I saw a man I used to know; that is, I have an idea that he was an old acquaintance. I intended to speak to him after the performance, but missed him in the crowd."

"I met you, happened to speak about the matter, and you said I ought to be able to find out something about the man by applying at the box-office."

"That is a good story, and perfectly consistent," the actor observed.

"It will work all right, I think," the detective declared.

The two took the L road to Fourteenth street.

At the Academy of Music Blondell introduced his companion to the treasurer of the theater, and explained what he wanted.

The official was an agreeable gentleman, and as it chanced remembered all the particulars in regard to the sale of the box.

"It was bought by one of the District Messenger-boys, a red-headed, freckled-faced lad, about fifteen or sixteen years old," the treasurer explained.

"Probably at the Central Office you will be able to find the boy, and ascertain from him who ordered the box."

The pair thanked the official and departed.

"The man who worked this job is no slouch, and it is not going to be an easy matter to run him to earth," Detective Hennessy remarked.

"Luckily, the superintendent of the Central Office is a friend of mine, and I can depend upon his doing all he can for me," the man-hunter added.

At the Central Office of the District Messenger Service the detective explained the particulars to the superintendent.

"The description fits Pat O'Toole," he remarked. "And if he is the boy you can depend upon getting a good account from him of the man, for he is an uncommon sharp chap."

Pat O'Toole was summoned and duly questioned.

He was one of those precocious lads, so often to be found in large cities, who possess a knowledge far beyond their years.

He knew the detective too, and was proud to be able to be of service to him.

"Yes, sir, I was de lad w'at went for de private box at de Academy for de bloke!" he replied.

"His nibs was at de Sturtevant House and he had Room 44. I remember dat number, you see, bekase it is one of de numbers of de old nigger gig, 4-11-44."

"I have played dat often, boss, yer see, to win a stake in dat policy game, but de mokes allers got t'rowed down when I had me money up."

"Room 44, eh?" and the detective made a note of the number.

"Yes, sir, dat's it. I h'isted up, and see'd de bloke—dat is, I would have see'd him if he hadn't had his head all done up in a cloth—said he had de toothache."

"Ah, yes, I see, the toothache," and as the detective spoke he glanced significantly at the young actor.

"He give me de cases, told me for to get dat lower box, and I did it to the queen's taste!"

"Do you think you would know the man if you ever saw him again?" the detective asked.

The boy shook his head, evidently doubtful.

"Well, I don't know 'bout dat, sir, for 'bout all dat I could see of de blokie was his eyes and dey were small and bright like a rat's for all de world."

The detective dismissed the boy with a quarter of a dollar for his trouble, thanked the superintendent, and, with his companion, departed.

"Didn't I say that this fellow was no slouch!" Hennessy exclaimed after he and Blondell reached the street.

"The toothache yarn was a clever dodge to keep his face concealed so that the boy would not be able to give a description of him."

"But the clerks of the hotel must have seen his face."

"Yes, but the chances are great that no one of them will be able to tell much about him," Hennessy replied.

"I have had a deal of experience with these hotel clerks, and I think I know the tribe thoroughly."

As a rule it is a hard matter to get much information out of them.

"If this man was a regular guest there would be some chance of getting a description of him, but as it is I do not think there is much."

"The hotel is on the European plan. You take a room there and get your meals where you like."

"Now then, the chances are great that the man we are after merely took a room there for a day; registered his name, paid his money, and was assigned to this particular room, and as it was his object to keep in the background as much as possible, it is very probable that none of the clerks ever saw him but once."

"Under such circumstances then it would not be strange if none of them were able to give a description of him," the Black Crook observed.

"Of course, I may not be right in this conjecture, but I am willing to bet a big apple that I am!" the detective declared.

The sleuth-hound would have been safe in betting much more than a big apple on the matter, for everything turned out just as he predicted.

The man who had sent for the messenger-boy from Room 44, registered as "J. S. Brown, Boston, Mass.," occupied the room only one day, and there was not a soul in the house who could give any description of him at all.

The actor felt decidedly discouraged as he and his companion left the hotel.

"We are completely baffled!" Blondell exclaimed.

"Oh, no, there is still another chance for us," the man-hunter replied.

"But I thought that it was best to go ahead on this line until I either got on the track of my man or else run up a tree."

"We have arrived at the tree, so we will try another tack."

"And what is that?"

"We will cross-examine the usher at the Academy of Music who conducted the two men to the box," Detective Hennessy explained.

"As a rule, these theater-ushers are sharp fellows, and as the private-boxes are not sold every night, it is possible that the man who ushered the pair to the box may be able to tell what they looked like."

"That is a capital idea!" the actor declared. "And I would not be surprised if you did succeed in getting some information."

"It is worth trying for some!" the sleuth-hound assented.

At the theater they had the luck to find the man who had conducted the two men to the box.

"Oh, yes, I remember them distinctly, for they were an odd pair," the actor said.

"It was a gentleman and his colored servant. I don't recollect exactly about the man's appearance, but it is my impression that he was a middle aged party, rather dark complexioned, a Spaniard, or some other foreigner, but the negro was such an odd-looking customer that I took a good squint at him; he was an undersized, thick-set fellow, with a short, bushy beard, regular wool, you know, and big, white teeth, a regular savage-

looking chap with as wicked a pair of eyes as I ever saw in a man's head."

Blondell could hardly refrain from crying out, for it was the description of Hala Hula, the Bushman.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOT ON THE TRAIL.

"Do you think that you would be able to recognize the pair if you ever saw them again?" the detective asked.

"Well, I am not so sure about the gentleman, but the negro I would be able to spot anywhere," the usher replied.

"I couldn't make any mistake about him, you know, for an uglier, or more devilish-looking customer I never saw before!"

"A foreigner with a negro servant, eh?" the detective asked, slowly and thoughtfully.

"Yes, and I will take my oath that the negro was an American darkey!" the man declared.

"I am well-posted about negroes, too, you understand, for I have lived in the South, but such a savage as this chap I never run across before."

"Looks like a regular wild man, you understand."

"Yes, I comprehend. You never saw either of the pair before?" Hennessy asked.

"No, never!"

"Did they stay the performance out?" the detective queried.

"No, they left before the play ended; after the second or third act, I think, but I am really not positive in regard to the exact time."

This was all that the usher knew about the matter.

The seekers after knowledge departed, satisfied that they had gained an important bit of information.

"We are beginning to get a little light now," Detective Hennessy observed.

"Yes; these two men in the box are evidently the pair who committed the murder."

"But we can't boast of having made much progress," the sleuth-hound observed. "For the odds are great that these two men were so carefully disguised that we will not be able to get a clue to them from the description given by this usher."

"Isn't it a rule that the most expert and cunning criminals make awful blunders at times?" the Black Crook asked.

"Oh, yes; that is a well known fact, and, if it was not so, half the time we detectives would not be able to nail our men," Hennessy answered immediately.

"Of course it is a trick of the trade for us detectives to plume ourselves upon our smartness, but men in my line, who are honest, when brought fairly to book, must admit that luck and the stupid blunders of the men who break the laws have more to do with the capture of crooks than our smartness."

"I was under the impression that such was the case," the actor observed.

"Now, in this affair I feel pretty certain that the men who planned and committed this atrocious murder made the blunder of not assuming a complete disguise, for from the description I think I recognize one of them."

Blondell then related the particulars of his meeting with the manager of the Royal Australian Troupe of Bushmen, and how, with his German medical friend, he had gone with the Englishman to the boarding-house of the troupe.

"This fellow, Hala Hula, answers the description given by the usher of the supposed negro servant to a hair," the Black Crook declared in conclusion.

"By Jove! if this is so it lets a deal of light in on the mystery!" the detective exclaimed.

"I do not know much about these bushmen, for I am not well posted in regard to Australia, but it strikes me that I have read that these wild men out in that region used poisoned arrows and things of that kind in their warfare," Hennessy continued.

"Yes, I believe that to be a fact, but we can easily ascertain all that we want to know about the matter by going to the museum, where the bushmen are performing, and inquiring of the manager."

"That is a good idea!" by more information claimed.

"Roach, the manager, is low and will be glad to do as tough a mission in his power," Blondell said.

"I don't think there is a black on the high seas," the detective claimed.

"This black savage, Hala Hula, the old scoundrel who committed the murder at the instigation of the gentleman, whom the usher master of the negro, remarked, in his

"That explains how it was had money to buy liquor, and his passage to his native land. You ascribe it to

"Yes, that is true. I remember to be a very fiend was much surprised to find me as this comm had money, and he told me the rival out of her p account for it."

"It was the price of the man, not strong enough. Undoubtedly, but as the served thoughtfully is on the high seas, well on that I am puzzled voyage, you will not be able to see I was right in

"The fellow certainly told me he had come to the forelock!"

"We can question the troupe, and from him we may here is one more a clue to man who hired the assassin observed after mit the murder," the detective

"It is possible, of course, that the people at the that the man has covered up blacks stayed; p carefully that we will not be visitors of whom t him."

The two had arrived in the night this was a go seum during the conversation until they discussed the matter, formation did t they entered the building.

The bushmen were in the troupe remembered that performance when the pair, Hala Hula once, an Englishman delivering a lecture, it was the night manner and customs of the Australian, and did no while the bushmen went through dances and other savage perfor tell what the

Of course there was no way now whether t speak to the manager until they not, for after e ended.

Then Blondell introduced until after eleven friend of his who took a great come to the end everything appertaining to Australia and must go

The detective suggested an active declared w to one of the neighboring saloons.

To a man like the jolly Brito liquid refreshment might be en this sort was always in order, three were seated at a table, with CHAPTER XXV hued ale foaming in their glasses. RANK PROPOS easy matter to draw from the the knowledge he possessed in awaited Blonde Australian blacks. performance in

Finally the detective said that somewhere that the blacks were through the of using poisonous darts, in the he encountered

"I believe some of the tribes a blowpipe, composed of a hollow, my dear means of which they projected I wanted to a dart, but I only know of it, by an extremely f never saw it done, and it is mo?" the young that it was one of the old customs with the since the appearance of the w great island have fallen into dis that Von Sill

"By the way you had a live queen of the that old savage Hala Hula," you to be on marked.

"Yes, I should say so, the old man him whi the manager replied.

"I related the particulars of the invitation f my friend here, and he was much per to-night v the actor observed. explained.

"Did you discover, by the way, been fearfully old rascal got the money which he the custom I remember that at the time you shut herself puzzled by the circumstance's death. asked.

"No, I never found out anything, but I would have be about the matter," the Englishman

"I questioned all the rest of the resume so." and not one of them could give marriage was formation. All were as much in a state of on t I was. usually are

"It must have been a sudden who take part for all the rest were positive time for sober scoundrel did not have any money, that the previous day, for he was almost, for althou liquor, and if he had possessed an Englishman certainly would have got his run it was my

"Did he have any friend or acquaintance she t from whom he could have procured particu money?" the detective asked. or fellow, I

"No; he was a surly old beggar and absolut took to anybody." exclaimed.

The investigators saw that it was aware, o

is a good idea!" By more information from after another round of ale, the manager, is no doubt, and no clue to the black on the high seas, the black savage, I had committed the mistake of the instigation of the whom the usher the negro. explains how it was to buy liquor, and to his native land. It is true. I remember to find and he told me the price of the man, but as the high seas, well on will not be able to question the man no mistake about that. From him we may who hired the "er," the detective, of course, has covered up we will not be arrived in the conversation discussed the matter the building. were in the when the pair delivered a lecture to the stomachs of the audience, and did not go to the men went through the savage performance there was no manager until the introduced I until after eleven. who took a great to the end of our rope in entertaining to Australia and must go off on a fresh suggested an active declared when they stood neighboring saloon. ent might be the jolly Brito ways in order, at a table, with CHAPTER XXVIII. in their glass RANK PROPOSITION. draw from the awaited Blondell when he got performance in the play that he blacks were through the stage-door into his darts, in the he encountered the German, e of the tribes posed of a hotel, my dear fellow, you are hey projected I wanted to see!" the German now of it, by an extremely friendly way. and it is mo?" the young actor replied, of the old cupther with the utmost cordial- nce of the w that Von Silbon acted as the ou had a live queen of the ballet, and there Hala Hula," fous to be on good terms with oped to be able to gain some in- om him which might be of particulars of invitation for you to partake he was mu per to-night with the madame," explained. r, by the way, been fearfully lonesome, you un- oney which he the custom of society has re- the time you shut herself up on account of circumstances death. and out any- id really cared anything for the he Englishman- ould have been different," Von he rest of the resume so." could give marriage was one of those hasty as much in trated on the spur of the mo- usually are keenly regretted by a sudden who take part in the matter after positive time for sober reflection." ave any more that the marriage was a rath- was almost, for although I was aware that possessed an Englishman was one of Helene's got his run, it was my impression from the friend or ac which she treated the man that I have pr cure particularly for him." asked. or fellow, I give you my word old beggar, ned absolutely nothing for him!" exclaimed. v that it wo we are aware, of course, that as the

manager of the lady I occupy a position which enables me to be on very confidential terms with her, and I assure you that she had no idea of marrying the man a half-hour before the event took place."

"You surprise me!"

"We had a little dinner together, the madame, Dunbarton and myself, we got to joking about getting married, and then, on the spur of the moment, in a fit of pique really, I believe, the madame agreed to be wedded, and the ceremony was performed before any of us had time to take a sober second thought."

"Yes, I see."

"I know that Helene regretted her foolishness bitterly, but as she is both a proud and a plucky woman she kept her thoughts to herself and went on resolved to make the best of a bad bargain."

"Under the circumstances it was the wisest thing to do."

"And now that the man is dead, although she feels sorry for the fellow, and was fearfully shocked by his untimely taking off, yet, to men who know her as well as you and I do, she is not going to make the pretense that she is heavily weighted down by sorrow; there is nothing of the hypocrite about the madame, you understand, although to the world at large she puts on the appearance of deep grief."

"A due regard must be paid to the opinion of the world of course."

"But now she thinks she has secluded herself long enough, and she proposes to enjoy life a little, on the quiet, you comprehend."

"This supper to-night is to signal her return to the world."

"There will not be any one but us two and the madame, if you will be kind enough to honor her with your presence."

"I shall be delighted!" the actor declared. "Will it be necessary for me to go home and dress?"

"Not at all!" Silbon exclaimed. "Come just as you are, there will not be any formality about the affair, you understand."

"All right! I am with you then!"

"The madame will be delighted, I am sure," the German remarked as the two proceeded up the street.

"She has kept herself entirely secluded since Dunbarton's sudden death, and she will greatly enjoy getting back into the world again."

Blondell made a suitable reply and the pair chatted about different matters until the hotel where the *danseuse* resided was reached.

The Black Crook was prompt to accept the invitation for he understood that the *danseuse* had some object in sending for him and he hoped to be able to discover something which would aid the cunning detective who had undertaken to ferret out the murderer of the unfortunate English girl.

When Von Silbon introduced Blondell into the apartment of the *danseuse*, Helene received him in the warmest manner.

Although she was dressed in deep mourning, yet the somber black only seemed to enhance the charms of this peerless creature.

True she had done everything in her power to make herself appear attractive to the eyes of the man whom she desired to win.

After a few minutes of conversation Helene led the way to the table, where a most delicious supper, with the choicest of wines, had been provided.

The repast proceeded, enlivened by brilliant sallies of wit from Helene who never appeared to better advantage.

After they had been at the table about thirty minutes, and were about through with the meal, a messenger came for Von Silbon, who begged the others to excuse him for fifteen or twenty minutes.

"Don't hang yourself!" Helene exclaimed.

"I don't doubt that Mr. Blondell can manage to entertain me until you return."

Von Silbon bowed and departed.

"I am not sorry that he was called away," the *danseuse* remarked after the German closed the door behind him. "For it gives us an opportunity to have a little private conversation."

"I suppose you were surprised when you heard of my marriage to Dunbarton."

"Yes, but Mr. Von Silbon explained to me how it was that it came to take place."

"It was one of those foolish, thoughtless acts that women are guilty of sometimes," the *danseuse* declared with a deep sigh and a grave shake of the head.

"If anybody had told me in advance that I would ever be guilty of such an act of folly I would have laughed at them!"

"The wisest of us make mistakes sometimes," Blondell observed.

"Oh, yes, that is true. I had not been married an hour before I realized what an idiot I had been to yield to a foolish impulse, but I felt utterly wretched and desperate at the time the marriage was suggested, and I was in that state of mind when I really did not care what became of me."

"I do not doubt that if I had been forced to live with that unfortunate young man one of us would have been dreadfully wretched."

"Fate was merciful to me—to both of us perhaps, for although I never like to speak ill of the dead, yet I cannot help saying that from the way that Dunbarton was living he was no good to himself or to any one else."

"Judging from what I saw of the young man your statement is correct."

"But now just see what a strange world this is, and how unexpectedly fortune sometimes favors us poor mortals," the lady remarked.

"I married Dunbarton in a fit of pique really, and, as I told you, was heartily sorry in five minutes after the words were spoken which bound me to him; then came the tragedy of the unfortunate young man's sudden death, a circumstance which shocked me greatly."

"Yes, I can readily understand how affected you must have been by the affair."

"In reflecting upon the circumstance I had about come to the conclusion that it was the greatest mistake I ever made in my life, when I received information which conveyed to me the intelligence that this supposed mistake was going to turn out to be one of the luckiest things that I had ever did in all my life."

"You surprise me!" the young actor exclaimed, pretending to take a great interest in the recital.

"A few words will explain the matter. Talbot Dunbarton, my unfortunate husband, was one of the Dunbartons of Clitheroe, the last scion of one of the oldest English families."

"He inherited a princely fortune, but being a very fast young man, had contrived to get rid of it all with the exception of a bequest of fifty thousand dollars, which he had not yet received."

"By his death the fifty thousand dollars comes to me, for right after our marriage he made a will in my favor, so that I could inherit all that he left in case he died before I did."

"That was certainly a fortunate thing for you."

"Yes, fifty thousand dollars is quite a handsome sum, but it isn't anything compared to the windfall which has just come to me!" the *danseuse* declared with sparkling eyes.

"Dunbarton had an uncle, a wild sort of a fellow, who got in trouble in England, and was forced to seek refuge in foreign parts."

"This uncle changed his name, fearing that he would be pursued, and here in America, in the gold-mining region, where he located, was known as Reginald D. Brown, instead of Reginald Dunbarton."

"There he made a colossal fortune, and in time returned to England, where he died leaving a fortune of a million of pounds."

"An enormous sum indeed!" Blondell exclaimed, full of wonder at this strange story.

"When he returned to England, the man still passed under the name of Brown, never going near his relatives, so that, when he died, no one knew who was entitled to his wealth until a sharp lawyer happened by accident to stumble upon the truth."

"The lawyer saw that there was a chance for him to make a good thing out of the affair, and so he set to work to get up a complete case."

"This he accomplished; all the proofs are secured, the lawyer has put himself in communication with me, and in a short time, as Talbot Dunbarton's legal heir, the vast estate will come to me!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A FRANK OFFER.

This revelation was a complete surprise to the Black Crook, and as he revolved the matter rapidly in his mind he knew not what to make of it.

He had the worst possible opinion of the woman, and the thought came to him:

Could it be possible that in some mysterious way she had learned that Dunbarton was the sole heir to the vast estate, then had formed a plot to wed the man, with the idea of getting him to make a will in her favor, and, after the paper was executed, putting him out of the way?

The idea was a monstrous one, yet Blondell so thoroughly distrusted the woman that he was rather inclined to the belief that there might be some truth in the supposition.

There was a ring of triumph in the voice of Helene as she finished the sentence, and with her brilliant eyes she glanced expectantly at Blondell's face, as if anxious to see what effect the disclosure had upon him.

The young actor, conscious of the scrutiny, did not attempt to conceal the fact that he was greatly surprised, and smiled pleasantly as he remarked:

"It is in order, of course, to congratulate you upon such a lucky stroke of fortune."

"Thank you," responded the lady, with a bow. "I shall not want for congratulations, nor for friends, as soon as the news becomes public property, and that will be tomorrow, for the morning newspapers will contain a complete history of the affair."

"So soon?"

"Yes, the lawyer is in New York, and as soon as he made an arrangement with me in regard to the matter, he judged that it would be wise to give a full history of the case to the public."

"You understand, of course, that this sharp legal gentleman has not been to all this trouble for nothing; he has devoted a great deal of time to making a complete case and expects to be richly paid for his exertions."

"Well, in a case of this kind the laborer is certainly worthy of his hire, and if he can put you in possession of the million of pounds, you ought not to grudge a handsome sum to the man for his trouble."

"I have always been noted for being a liberal paymaster, and I can assure you that I did not haggle with the legal gentleman in regard to his terms."

"And now, just see what a glorious prospect there is for me!" the *danseuse* exclaimed, with sparkling eyes and a flushed face.

"With this wealth I can reign as a queen in some part of Europe."

"I will shake the dust of the stage from my feet! No more will I strive to please the fancy of the capricious multitude. No more wear the hollow, artificial smile which all the people who depend upon the favor of the public for their bread and butter are obliged to assume."

"A pleasant prospect truly!"

"In some of the petty kingdoms of the Continent I can easily buy a title, and as I will have plenty of money to support my rank, there is no doubt but what I will be gladly received into society."

"There is not much doubt about that," Blondell assented.

"Then think what a life of ease and luxury I will enjoy!" the *danseuse* exclaimed.

"There is no queen in all the world who will be able to outshine me, for I will have as much money as any of them, and as far as personal attractiveness goes, as the female members of the royal families and of the nobility are not remarkable for their good looks, I need not fear that I will be outshone."

"Oh, it is certainly a brilliant prospect," the actor observed.

"There is only one drawback as far as I see," Helene remarked in a reflective way, "and that is I fear I will be horribly lonesome."

"No, no!" Blondell exclaimed. "I do not think you need to be alarmed about that, for just as soon as it is known that you have an enormous fortune you will be surrounded by a multitude of friends, all anxious to contribute to your enjoyment."

"Bah! what do you suppose I care for friends of that kind!" the *danseuse* exclaimed in a tone full of sovereign contempt.

"Friendship bought with money is something I despise," she continued.

"Besides, I don't care for new friends and greatly prefer old ones."

"Now take a man like yourself, in whose company and conversation I take a great deal of pleasure, a hundred new friends, attracted to me solely by the fact that I was wealthy, would not supply your place."

"You are pleased to flatter me, I fear!" the actor exclaimed with a deprecative shake of the head.

"Oh, no! I am only speaking the honest truth—telling you exactly what I think about the matter," Helene declared.

"Now, my dear fellow, I am going to speak real frankly to you," she continued.

"We are old professional associates, you know, and there is no reason why I should beat about the bush."

"I like you—I am always happy and contented when I am in your society, and I would be willing to do almost anything to secure the pleasure of your company in the future. If I could be sure of retaining you by my side I know that my life would be ten times happier."

"I do not know how you are situated, of course," she added after a slight pause.

"It may be possible that you are not free to marry me—that you are bound to some other woman, although I have always heard you spoken of as a bachelor," and there was an anxious, wistful look in her eyes as she spoke.

"That is correct—I am heart free," the Black Crook replied.

"I am glad of that for it leaves you at liberty to take my offer."

"I am very much flattered indeed, but I don't really know what to say," Blondell replied in an earnest way.

"You see, I am an odd, peculiar sort of a fellow, and always had the idea that I was destined for an old bachelor."

"If you accept my offer you will be about as much at liberty to follow your own inclinations as though you were still a free man."

"In the marriage state, you know, it is the woman who is always under the most restraint."

"Yes, I presume that is the truth," the actor replied.

"But this proposal has taken me so completely by surprise that I do not know what to say," the Black Crook continued, affecting to be very much puzzled.

"Take time to reflect upon the matter," the *danseuse* remarked.

"It is not necessary that you should come to a decision to-night—two or three days—a week hence—in fact, take all the time you like, only try to bring yourself to give a favorable answer," and there was a world of entreaty in her voice.

The clock on the mantle now struck one, warning both that it was time for the actor to depart.

"In two or three days I will decide!" the Black Crook declared as he bid the *danseuse* good-night.

CHAPTER XXX.

A REVELATION.

As Blondell proceeded to his home—he had his quarters at a theatrical boarding-house in Twentieth street—he reflected upon the particulars of the interview with the queen of the ballet.

And the more he reflected upon the matter the greater the puzzle seemed to him.

"It does not seem possible that there was any foul play about Dunbarton's death, or else the doctors would surely have detected it," he mused, putting his thoughts into words as he walked along the deserted streets.

"But there is no doubt in my mind that even if Dunbarton's death was due to natural causes this woman knew that he was going to inherit this vast property, and that was why she married him."

"It was a part of a carefully prepared plan, and undoubtedly she calculated to get rid of him as soon as she got everything prepared so that she could inherit the property."

"Fortune aided her, and fate removed the Englishman, thus saving her from the commission of a crime."

"I will consult the detective to-morrow; when I reveal the particulars to him he may be able to guess more correctly in regard to the riddle than I can."

The actor was up early in the morning, and as breakfast was not ready—theatrical people are not noted for their early rising—he procured a morning newspaper from the stand at the corner and went into the parlor.

There, seated by one of the windows, was the veteran actor who played the role of the "old man" in the Black Crook.

The old gentleman was apparently deeply interested in a newspaper which he was perusing, but looked up and greeted Blondell with a cheery good-morning, as he entered.

John Archibald the veteran was named, and he was a most excellent actor. One of the old English stock who had learned his business in the best theaters abroad.

"Have you read your morning paper yet?" the veteran queried.

"No, I have just bought it."

"Well, sir, there is an old adage that truth is stranger than fiction, and in the columns of my newspaper this morning is contained a striking illustration of how extremely true the saying is."

"I presume your paper also has the article," continued the old gentleman, and as he spoke he held up the journal for Blondell's inspection, and pointed to the article which had attracted his attention.

"One million of pounds for the queen of the ballet, the divine Helene Marzello, the peerless premier of the Black Crook," said Blondell, reading the head-lines of the article.

"What do you think of that?" the old actor exclaimed.

"It is no news to me," the Black Crook replied. "I took supper with the lady after the performance last night, and she told me that the account would appear in the morning newspapers."

"I say, Blondell, you are not a friend of that woman, are you?" exclaimed the old actor, with a grave shake of the head.

"No, an acquaintance, merely."

"Well, I am glad of that, for I tell you, Blondell, that woman is the worst kind of a bad egg!" the veteran declared.

"I know what I am talking about, my boy, for I have known all about her for a good ten years, and during that time she has ruined two or three men a year in the most complete manner."

"Yes, I understand that her past career has been a most unsavory one."

"My dear fellow, she has been a regular harpy!" the old gentleman declared.

"And now to think that she, after leading such a life, should come in for this enormous property."

"It is odd."

"Odd! Yes, sir, I should say that it was one of the strangest things that ever happened. I wondered at the time when she married Dunbarton why she did it, for I knew that that precious young donkey had about run through all his property."

"You see, my boy, I know all about these Dunbartons, for I was brought up in the same town with them."

"But, my dear fellow, the woman evidently knew that this big fortune was coming to the young scamp, and so she married him."

"Yes, it certainly looks like it."

Blondell had helped himself to a chair by the veteran's side, so as to be able to converse at ease.

"Death stepped in, took Dunbarton away, and now all the wealth comes to this miserable woman."

"Yes, the decrees of fate are wonderfully strange, sometimes."

"Very true, but I can tell you a story much stranger than this one, even, and I have an idea that I am about the only person in the world who can tell it, too," the veteran remarked, reflectively.

"Is it possible?" the young actor asked, decidedly interested, for he knew that whatever the old gentleman had to say was always well worth listening to.

"This daring woman has been signally favored by fortune for there were two lives

between her estate."

"Two lives"

"Yes, for to her death the daughter Dunbarton, he made her Brown."

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between her and this great Dunbarton estate."

"Two lives?"

"Yes, for Florence Ballentine, who came to her death in such a mysterious way, was the daughter and legal heir of Reginald Dunbarton, who in the mining region where he made his money, posed by the name of Brown."

"Florence his daughter!" Blondell cried, his head in a whirl. "You astound me!"

"It is the truth. I was a member of the company playing at the theater in the mining-camp when Brown married the young actress, Florence's mother."

"I knew that his right name was Dunbarton, for, as I told you, I knew all about the family at home."

"He did not know me, and so I held my tongue about him."

"At that time, you must understand, this man was not rich, nor did any one ever expect that he would be."

"And after Florence's birth, when the wife had left Brown, I met the mother again, and, in fact, frequently encountered her as the years went on; then, after she died and Florence took to the stage, she was a member of the same company that I was in, and I took a decided interest in the girl."

"It was natural under the circumstances."

"After some years when on a Western trip, I came again to the mining-town and inquired for Brown, but he had gone to some other location to better his fortunes and no one knew anything about him."

"Of course, I took no particular interest in the man, and only inquired out of idle curiosity. I regarded him as a bad egg, you know, and I never had a thought that he would ever amount to anything."

"This is a queer world, and the changes which fortune makes are wonderful in the extreme sometimes."

"That is true enough, and the story of Reginald Dunbarton's life is convincing evidence of it."

"And Florence Ballentine was then the daughter of Reginald Dunbarton?"

"Yes, and if she had lived she would have been the legal heir to all this vast estate, which now will go to this Helene Marzello, who is no better than a scheming adventuress."

The young actor was strangely agitated by the revelation made by the veteran, but he concealed his feelings under the mask of unconcern, and did not allow his companion to perceive that he was particularly interested in the recital.

The old gentleman moralized at length upon how strange it was that fate should decree that the young girl should be suddenly cut off, right in the flower of her youth, and just at the time when an immense fortune was about to come to her.

The breakfast summoned the pair to the table, and after the meal was ended Blondell proceeded at once to the Police Headquarters, eager to reveal to Detective Hennessy the information which he had gained, for in his judgment the story of the veteran actor let in a flood of light upon the mystery.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A NEW DODGE.

DETECTIVE HENNESSY was at leisure, and so the Black Crook was able to gain an interview with him at once.

The detective listened with the utmost attention to the story which Blondell told, and when the young actor wound up by declaring that it was his opinion that they now held the key to the mystery, he immediately assented.

"Yes, I do not think there is a doubt about the matter," Detective Hennessy remarked. "According to the proofs we have obtained the young actress, Florence Ballentine, was murdered, but there did not seem to be any reason why her death should be desired by any one, that is, no reason strong enough to lead to the committal of such a crime."

But this revelation throws a new light upon the affair," Blondell observed.

"Oh, yes; there was a prize of five millions of dollars at stake, and such a woman as this Helene Marzello undoubtedly is, would not be apt to hesitate in regard to what she did to gain such a stake."

"It is my idea that in some way the wo-

man learned the particulars in regard to this vast fortune which waited for a claimant," Blondell observed in a reflective way.

"If the girl was out of the way this young Englishman, Dunbarton, would come in for the money."

"She knew that Dunbarton was so much infatuated with her that she could marry him at any time, so she conceived the idea of having the girl killed, then she could marry the young man, and thus get hold of the property."

"I reckon you have hit upon the truth," the detective assented.

"It is possible too that Dunbarton was put out of the way, although the doctors at the inquest concluded that his death was due to natural causes," the sleuth continued.

"A suspicion of that kind entered my mind," the actor observed. "But I really think we wrong the woman. The fact is that we have such a bad opinion of her that we are ready to believe that she is capable of committing almost any crime."

"Yes, that is so," Detective Hennessy assented. "Well, I ran that bushman business into the ground yesterday," the man-hunter added.

"The ship, Sea Lion, sailed for Australia as advertised, and on board of her was this Hala Hula, so, for the present, he is out of the way, although we can bring him back easily enough from Australia, after he arrives, if we can secure proof enough to warrant such a proceeding, but at present it seems to me that our case is a little weak."

"Now, assuming that this woman is at the bottom of the plot, she must have had some go-between—some man who arranged the deal with the bushman, and I am going to shadow her for the purpose of ascertaining who he is, then I may be able to gain a point."

"This German, her manager, who calls himself Von Silbon, is the fellow who attends to all her business affairs," Blondell remarked.

"I have not a very good opinion of the man, for I think he is inclined to be a rascal, but I do not believe he is bad enough to take an active part in a crime of this kind."

"I have already posted myself pretty well in regard to the madame and her associates," Detective Hennessy observed.

"Like the most of these foreign people, whose careers had been a little shady, the woman has a number of visitors who appear to be a little under the weather."

"All these people are foreigners, you understand, and some one of them is, probably, the man who engineered the job."

"It is likely, for I do not believe Von Silbon would risk his neck by taking part in such a crime."

"If careful shadowing will put me on the trail I will soon 'hit it off' and when I do I will warn you immediately."

And this brought the interview to an end.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE RETURN.

THERE is an old saying about the best laid plans of mice and men not working as they ought to do.

It is an ancient adage and a wise one, certainly, as the *danseuse* and her accomplice, the wily and unscrupulous lawyer, were fated to discover.

They had got the bushman safe out of the country, and never expected to hear of him again.

For, as the lawyer explained to Helene: "I have taken care to provide the savage with rum enough so that he need not draw a sober breath from the time he sails until he lands in Australia, and if he swills the liquor down, as undoubtedly he will, the chances are great that 'the man with the poker' will get after him, and he will never reach his native continent alive."

"If he should die of the horrors on the trip it would undoubtedly be a good thing for us," the *danseuse* had replied.

"It was my calculation that if I supplied him with rum enough, and took care to get the vilest stuff I could procure, he would make a speedy end of himself," Luddingford remarked.

The wily lawyer had made a cunning calculation, but he had not taken into consider-

ation the fact that the bushman was threatened with an attack of the horrors before he went on board of the ship.

Then, too, there was a delay in the departure of the vessel.

A number of the crew had come on board drunk, and there was trouble between the men and the officers just as soon as the ship got under way.

Some of the men were ugly and refused to do duty, so the vessel was compelled to anchor in the lower bay until the trouble was settled.

Some twenty hours the ship was detained, and during this time the bushman indulged in the vile rum, which the lawyer had procured for him, to such an extent that when the ship finally headed for the ocean the black was no better than a raving lunatic.

It was night when the ship sailed.

The bushman came on deck in spite of all the efforts of the men to keep him below.

He fought the sailors with the fury of a demon, and at last, when hard pushed by the sailors, leaped overboard.

Although the captain was a stern old sea-dog, who, from long experience had come to regard the black fellows as being no better than so many beasts, yet he had the ship put about, lowered a boat and did his best to pick up the man.

The attempt was a failure, for no trace of Hala Hula could be found; so, after a half-hour's delay, the search was given up and the ship went on its way, all being under the impression that the black had found a watery grave.

The old adage though that the devil looks after his own proved to be true in this instance.

Hala Hula's cold bath had the effect of partially curing him of the madness which had seized upon his brain.

He was a good swimmer, and when he came to the surface after his dive the instinct of self-preservation caused him to strike out lustily.

A log came within his reach, and as it was amply big enough to support his weight, he was enabled to keep on the surface.

In the darkness though both the ship and the rescuing party missed him, but the tide, being a strong flood, finally carried the log ashore on Staten Island, and thus Hala Hula once again got to dry land.

As soon as the effects of the water passed away the horrors returned.

The bushman wandered into the interior of the island, was there arrested by some village constables and conveyed to the lock-up.

In the morning, the authorities thinking they had got hold of a lunatic, had him sent to an asylum.

In the asylum the doctors speedily discovered what ailed the man, and proceeded to apply the proper remedies.

The black's attack was a violent one though, and it was two weeks before he was discharged as cured.

Then he came to New York.

The bushman was penniless, for the large sum of money which the lawyer gave him in payment of his services, he had for safe keeping sewed in the lining of his vest.

In his struggle with the sailors his coat had been torn off, and the vest had also been so roughly handled that he had lost it in his struggle with the waves.

The bushman was naturally a cunning fellow though, and his brief experience in the show business had taught him how to take care of himself even though he was in a strange land.

The troupe of Royal Australian Bushmen were no longer in New York, having departed on a tour, so he could not regain them.

He went to the museum where the troupe had been on exhibition and applied for an engagement.

The manager could not use him, but sent him to one of the agents who make a business of supplying the museums with novel features, and he got him an engagement with a museum on the East Side of town.

Being thus enabled to live, the bushman hired the special officer attached to the museum to find Luddingford for him.

This did not prove to be a difficult task, and great was the astonishment of the burly lawyer when he received a message from the black.

The message was an urgent one, and Luddingford did not dare to disregard it, although he was decidedly annoyed to find that the man whom he had supposed to be well on his way to Australia was in New York.

The interview was an extremely unsatisfactory one to the lawyer, and after it was over Luddingford proceeded to consult Helene Marzello, for in the emergency which had arisen, he felt the need of her counsel, for he was at a loss what to do.

When the lawyer reached the hotel where the *dansouse* resided he encountered the German, Von Silbon.

"Is the madame at home?" Luddingford inquired.

"Yes, you will find her in her apartment."

"I am glad of that for I wish to consult with her."

Then the lawyer took a second look at Von Silbon and noticed that he was dressed for traveling.

"Are you about to go on a journey?"

"Exactly, I am bound for a trip across the water."

"Isn't this rather sudden?" the lawyer asked in surprise.

"Yes, it is, but, my dear fellow, I am a creature of impulse, you know."

"Do you go on business—has the madame some new scheme on hand?"

"Oh, no; the fact of the matter is that the madame and I have parted company."

"You amaze me!" Luddingford exclaimed.

"It is the truth; the best of friends must part sometimes, you know."

"But isn't this rather sudden?"

"Yes, it is."

"Have you quarreled?"

"Oh, no! We part the best of friends; but a certain thing has happened which makes me believe that I would be better off if I parted company with the divine Helene for awhile."

Luddingford looked surprised.

The German smiled.

"You are a hard-headed, practical Englishman, and I do not doubt that you will be surprised that I have allowed myself to be swayed by a vision."

"A vision?"

"Yes, a dream."

"You are speaking in riddles."

"A few words will explain," Von Silbon said in a very serious way.

"You know that I come of an old German family, and in the old days some of my kindred were allied with royalty itself."

"Have you ever heard of the specter of the White Lady, which is said to appear to the reigning house of Germany at certain times on purpose to warn them that danger threatens?"

"Oh, yes, I have heard the legend."

"Well, my family have a White Lady, too, and she has appeared to me in my dreams for three nights hand-running, and that signifies that if I keep on as I am going I shall meet with some extremely bad luck."

"And do you believe this?" the wily lawyer asked, in amazement.

"I am so firmly convinced of it that I have parted company with the madame and am going to cross the water to change my luck."

"But here comes my cab now! Good-by, my dear fellow; take good care of yourself, and if you are engaged in any enterprise with the madame, I would advise you to keep a careful lookout for yourself."

Then Von Silbon shook hands with the Englishman and departed, leaving him much surprised that a man could be so impressed by a dream.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A DESPERATE RESOLUTION.

AFTER his interview with Von Silbon, Luddingford sent up his card to the *dansouse*, and while waiting for the boy's return fell to meditating upon the situation.

"The madame is apparently well satisfied with the outlook," he mused.

"To her thinking there is not a cloud in the sky, all is fair, the sun shines, and she is going to be successful in her undertakings."

"I fancy, though, that this news of mine will be apt to disturb her a little."

The arrival of the bell-boy, bearing a message that the *dansouse* desired him to come up, put an end to his reflections.

Helene received him in her parlor.

"Can I speak freely?" Luddingford asked, after he carefully closed the door behind him.

"Yes, you can."

"I come to talk of a most important matter, and it would be a very serious thing indeed if our words should be overheard."

"Do not borrow any trouble in regard to the matter. You can speak with perfect freedom."

"Where is your maid?"

"Gone out; there isn't any one in the apartments but ourselves."

"That is fortunate, for I wish to be able to speak without restraint."

"You can do so."

"I have a very unpleasant disclosure to make," the lawyer remarked, with a grave shake of the head as he helped himself to a chair.

The lady looked surprised.

"That villain of a black, Hala Hula, is in the city again!"

A dark frown appeared on Helene's beautiful face.

"I am amazed. I thought that he had sailed for Australia."

"So he did. I went to the ship with him myself, saw him safely on board and waited until she hauled out into the stream."

"How comes it that he is here then?" the *dansouse* asked, sharply.

She was evidently much annoyed by the circumstance.

"Well, as near as I can make out, for the fellow does not seem able to give a very clear account of the matter, he had a fit of horrors, jumped overboard from the ship, and managed to get to land."

"Then he was arrested and locked up for safe keeping."

"After the horrors left him he was released and contrived to make his way to the city, got an engagement in a museum until he could hunt me up, but now that he has found me he announces that he has made up his mind not to go to Australia."

"Not return to Australia!" the *dansouse* exclaimed in alarm.

"No, and he appears to be firm about the matter, too."

"What does he intend to do?"

"Attach himself to me for the future."

"To you."

"Yes, that is a pleasant outlook for me, isn't it?" Luddingford exclaimed with a grimace.

"But I do not understand!"

"He considers that I am in his power, and thinks I ought to make a sort of a companion of him—take him with me, you know, wherever I go."

"But the idea is absurd!" Helene exclaimed, angrily.

"Yes, of course it is, but you can't get this miserable wretch to think so."

"He considers that he has done me a great service, you understand, and in return I must take care of him for the rest of his life."

"And if you refused I suppose that he would denounce you, although by so doing he would put in peril his own safety," Helene observed thoughtfully, and a dark look was on her face as she spoke.

"Yes, but I know from the way in which he speaks that he feels sure that I will not dare to offend him."

"Is the man drinking as much as usual?"

"Yes; about the first thing he said to me was to request that I would go out and buy him a gallon of good rum."

"And you complied?"

"Oh, yes; under the circumstances I could not very well help myself."

"It was wise, of course," Helene replied, and then for a few minutes she seemed to be lost in thought.

Luddingford watched her with an anxious expression on his face.

"We cannot allow this matter to go on in this way!" the *dansouse* declared at last after a long pause.

"While this man is in this country we are standing on the brink of a volcano as it were, for at any moment an explosion may come which will hurl us to destruction."

"Yes, that is true."

"The man must be silenced!" the woman declared in an earnest, determined tone.

Luddingford shook his head.

"It will not be a difficult matter," Helene urged.

"The man is in liquor almost all the time?"

"Yes."

"A few drops of a potent drug in his room and he will be placed in a position so that we need not fear his malice."

"Yes, it is apparently an easy matter, but I cannot do it. I am too chicken-hearted," the lawyer confessed.

"I will do it myself!" the *dansouse* exclaimed, with sudden determination.

"You can take me to him to-night—introduce me as the owner of a traveling show who is desirous of securing the man to go with my troupe."

"Yes, that tale will surely pass current!"

"Then you can have some brandy, and after the fellow is well under its influence it will be an easy matter to give him a dose which will speedily send him to the other world."

"Well, I do not see any reason why the scheme cannot be worked."

"It is not likely that anybody will trouble themselves much about the death of such a fellow," the *dansouse* argued.

"Oh, no; and then we can arrange the matter so that it will not be an easy matter for anybody to get on our track if an investigation is made."

"I have a room on the east side of town with a private entrance. I will take you there and bring the black to you."

"That is a capital idea!" Helene declared.

"We will arrange the job for to-night, and after the dose begins to take effect, it will be an easy matter to get the man into the street."

"The first policeman who comes along will jump to the conclusion that the man is drunk; he will be lugged off to the police station, and when it is discovered that he is dead, no one will be able to trace the deed to us."

The lawyer agreed to this, and then the two proceeded to arrange the details, after which Luddingford departed.

A few minutes after nine o'clock that night Helene arrived at the room of the lawyer.

It was situated in a squalid quarter in one of the narrow streets leading from the Bowery on the east side.

The *dansouse* had put on a plain, dark dress and a black wig, so that it would have been difficult for even an intimate acquaintance to have recognized her.

Removing her hat and coat she took a chair to await the coming of the victim.

There was a decanter of brandy upon the table, with a tray of glasses.

In about half-an-hour the lawyer and the bushman arrived.

Never had the black appeared more like a savage than now.

He was well under the influence of liquor, and his eyes glared with a ferocious light.

"This is the lady, Hala Hula," said Luddingford, as the *dansouse* arose on his approach.

The black grinned, and then fixed his eyes upon the brandy.

"Good! me want some!" he exclaimed.

Helene hastened to fill out a glass, which she tendered to the black; but as Hala Hula raised the brandy to his lips he was suddenly seized with an attack of the horrors.

With a wild yell he threw the glass away; the heavy tumbler struck Helene in the temple, felling her to the floor, and she went down as though she had been shot.

Luddingford sprung to the assistance of the stricken woman, only to be stunned into insensibility by a blow from a heavy chair in the hands of the bushman, who was fighting the devils, whom he believed to be attacking him, with the fury of despair.

The table was overturned, the lamp shattered, and soon the room was in a blaze.

It was an old, wooden house, so the flames spread with wonderful rapidity.

In the midst of the fire the madman danced, howled, and fought with his imaginary foes, making no attempt to escape.

As for the two senseless schemers upon the

floor, they themselves burning rapidly possible though could be people of And the three causing actress caused They of man, b of an o The r tiful q wonder where added who a found. Blor brought Marie sake. and of th he di open Ov Helene ful l

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floor, they were, of course, unable to help themselves, and so all three perished in the burning house, for the fire spread with such rapidity in the old rookery that it was not possible for any one to go to the rescue, although the yells of the frenzied bushman could be plainly heard by the crowd of people on the street.

And thus, in this dreadful way perished the three who had been instrumental in causing the death of the innocent young actress, and whose diabolical scheming had caused so much trouble and distress.

They had planned so carefully that no art of man could bring their crime home to them, but they did not escape the vengeance of an outraged Providence.

The mysterious disappearance of the beautiful queen of the ballet was a nine days' wonder. No one knew or could surmise where she had gone, and so her name was added to the long list of the unfortunates who are lost in New York and never found.

Blondell, eager to solve the mystery, was brought in contact with the French girl, Marie, who had betrayed the *dansuse* for his sake. In time he grew greatly to love her, and ere long they were married; but no trace of the beautiful but heartless woman could he discover. It was as if the earth had opened and swallowed her.

Over the awful fate of the "divine Helene" and her partners in crime a merciful Power drew the oblivious veil.

THE END.

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